

**A. CHAKOVSKY**

**The light of a distant star**

This is the story of Vladimir Zavyalov, a young airman, and Olga, the girl he loves, who was reported missing in the war. Twelve years after the end of the war he comes across a picture of her in an illustrated magazine. In his efforts to find her, he encounters different people and becomes involved in various situations, and this search changes his entire life.

"... I realised what that woman meant to you," says one of Zavyalov's friends. "She was your dream. Your love. A little island that you'd lost. You did everything to establish the whereabouts of that island, you were bent on finding it, on getting there at whatever the cost. . . . You probably think that you started your search simply because you loved her. . . . Of course, that was the reason. But perhaps there was something else too. Perhaps you wanted to make a fresh start, to enter a new phase in your life in which the main principle was fidelity to a cause you believed in. Honesty. Clarity of purpose. . . ."



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# **The light of a distant star**

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No, poets don't die, they go out like the suns,  
Their radiance travels through distance and time,  
The light they had spilt in their lifetime still burns  
And glows with a splendour eternal, sublime. . . .

## 1. ONE EVENING

"Are you going down to the beach?" Lena asked, catching up with Zavyalov.

"No."

"Then what do you want to do?"

"I don't know. Nothing in particular. I'll stay up in my room. Read a magazine or something."

"What, that old *Looch* again?"

"Yes."

"I give up!" Lena shrugged. "If you had nothing better to do than that why couldn't we have stayed and watched the picture to the end?"

She stood before him, young and lovely in a beautifully becoming red dress.

Lena had come to this rest home on the Riga coast three weeks earlier. For the past two weeks she and Zavyalov had spent a lot of time together, watching a film in the evening and afterwards strolling along the

beach if the weather was good, or sitting and talking in the lounge if it was too cold. When it rained they went up to Zavyalov's room, that is, if his roommate was downstairs playing cards.

She did not doubt for a moment that Zavyalov liked her company or that he intended to stay on at the rest home for a further 24-day term. All she was waiting for was for him to ask her to stay on too. Naturally he'd tell her that "he'd take care of everything". She had already made up her mind to agree, if he was insistent enough, of course.

Once Lena knew how things would shape in the next few weeks, she relaxed. Usually she felt nervous when setting out for a seaside resort and for the first few days she was there. She stopped worrying when someone began to dance attendance and she decided that he was worth her while. Her equanimity restored, she settled down. She knew exactly what would happen next.

But just now, Lena felt vaguely troubled without knowing why. Actually, nothing really had happened. They had been sitting in the hall, waiting for the film to begin. The star was the charming Gérard Philipe whom Lena had once seen in Gorky Street during a film festival in Moscow and thereafter considered a sort of personal friend.

The picture was late starting. Zavyalov sat leafing through an old illustrated magazine he had brought with him from the lounge. At last the lights were dimmed.

Lena calmly waited for Zavyalov to take her hand in that seemingly accidental but impulsive way that every man believes is a gesture peculiarly his own. But he made no move. When she turned to look at him she saw that he was still staring at the magazine.

At long last Lena's old friend appeared on the screen—the adorable Gérard with his large ears sticking out like a little boy's—the ideal whom none of the men she had ever met could hope to match. It was then that Zavyalov got up abruptly and, without a word, made his way to the exit.

She hesitated a few seconds, then after a brief inner battle gave up Gérard and followed Zavyalov out.

In the doorway she paused to look back at the screen which now showed the celebrated actress with the longest surname Lena knew and what was reputed to be the most beautiful bosom in the world.

And now here she was, standing outside with Zavyalov, listening to his stiff, curt replies. It was quite natural that she felt troubled. After all, he was an attractive, unattached man of thirty-four, a former Air Force Major and now a senior instructor at one of Moscow's flying clubs. And on the whole, Lena had had no luck in life.

She was very good-looking, far from stupid, and the sort men turned round to look at in the street, a great many of them anyway. She was well dressed. Her widow's pension and the money she earned as a retoucher at a photographer's was enough, if only just, for smart clothes. Men found her attractive and she always had someone in tow. The someone of the moment was Zavyalov.

The soft light of the lamp fell on her gleaming red dress which clung to her body, outlining her long slim legs, and shimmering like the skin of some exotic tropical fish.

"I give up," Lena repeated, trying not to sound too concerned. "You felt off colour, perhaps? It's terribly stuffy inside."

"No, I'm all right," he said absently.

Lena looked at him closely, wondering what had happened to him. He was leaning against the metal lamppost, holding the old magazine rolled into a tube. He didn't look any different: the same grey jacket slung on his shoulders, the same pale, as though faded, hair, and the same eyes, light too, with their keen, almost unblinking stare.

Everything about him, except the look in his eyes, was understandable to Lena and quite answered her taste in men. She'd expect an actor or a film producer to wear narrower trousers. Too wide trousers was a

fault she'd forgive only a Deputy Minister. But a man like Zavyalov, a retired officer, a serious person, not a martinet, of course, but rather a man who understood life, should wear precisely that width, neither too narrow nor too wide. A tailored shirt would not look well on him either, and the gaudy, sloppy kind even less so. The ordinary tennis shirt he had on was exactly right. Everyone should look what he was, Lena maintained. A playboy had to look like a playboy, a person with an important job had to look important, and an attractive retired flier in his mid-thirties had to look like Zavyalov. Everything about him was understandable and explicable. Everything but the look in his eyes. This was frightening sometimes. He must have stared like that when he piloted that fighter plane of his, or was it a bomber, she wasn't sure. But surely a man would not look like that at the woman he loved!

She could not understand what was happening at all. The only thing she did realise was that she must not nag.

"Oh well, I'll go back then and see the rest of the picture," she said casually. "But we will go for a walk afterwards, won't we? Will you be here?"

"I expect so."

She stopped herself just in time from shrugging her shoulders irritably, and walked back to the building, her slim high heels tapping sharply on the cement flags.

He did not turn to look at her.

Zavyalov walked along the water's edge where the packed sand felt hard and rather moist. It was quite late. The nightly promenading was almost over. A lone swimmer, who evidently liked a dip in the moonlight, was just going in. Lifting his legs high, he slowly waded through the shallow water, taking a long time to make the plunge.

A photographer, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and white, mud-spattered ducks rolled above his knees,

held in one hand a rope tied to a small boat with a fancy sail which he hauled along the shallow water like a Volga boatman, and in the other he had a tripod which he dragged over the sand.

Two local mermaids in swimsuits, wet hair hanging loose, walked slowly along the water's edge where the waves licked the beach, their feet leaving deep imprints—which filled up with water at once—in the damp black sand.

Two middle-aged dandies, in tight trunks embroidered with tiny sailing boats, their feet in wooden-soled sandals, were trying to overtake the mermaids. They panted a little from exertion, and the bald patches on their heads were the colour of parchment in the moonlight.

A fat, elderly man, on all fours, was busy sculpturing an enormous head of a woman in the sand.

Men in overalls were removing the heavy beach seats for the night. The local authorities, out of tender concern for the vacationists' morals, had ruled that nocturnal temptations like these be taken out of their way.

A long-legged god-like youth wearing a strip of loincloth stood beside a slim girl in a beach robe. He held a transistor playing softly in one hand while the other rested on her shoulder. Both gazed out to the horizon.

A truck loaded with clattering dustbins rumbled past.

Zavyalov turned the question over and over in his mind. What must he do now? No, there was nothing he could do while he was down here. It was only in Moscow that the thing could be cleared up. Only there.

But maybe he was mistaken? Why hadn't it occurred to him till now that he could be mistaken, that his eyes had deceived him, that it was a hallucination, an optical illusion?

No, it was no mistake. Such mistakes couldn't happen. Otherwise life would be too frightening. It



could not be a mistake. Heaven knows, he'd never had hallucinations. Never in those years of flying, nor now that he moved about on land only.

But what if it were a mistake just the same? He felt afraid for the first time in all the long years since piloting a plane was forbidden him and he was grounded for life. He did feel frightened then, he was terrified when they took his wings and told him that he was being retired. He told them that he would not be able to walk on the ground knowing that he could never fly. And they answered him jocularly that millions of people walked on the ground and had not the slightest wish to soar into the sky. People, yes, but then there were also birds—they also came down to earth, they even walked on the ground, but their life was in the sky. And life lost all sense for a bird if its wings were broken.

After that, Zavyalov had never felt frightened again. He thought he had already known his full share of fear. And now this. . . .

He walked up and down the deserted beach for a long time, haunted by a thought that excluded everything else.

Finally, he turned homeward. By now nobody was coming or going to the beach. It was too late for those who liked to turn in early, and too early for those who were waiting for the night to grow completely dark.

He was glad there was no one about. There was, though. One other man was there in the faint light of the cloud-covered moon. It was the artist or sculptor or whatever he was, the fat elderly man who was making a woman's head in the sand.

Zavyalov paused beside him. He did not know why. He wasn't interested in what the man was doing. He just did not want to go indoors. He had a feeling that once inside he would no longer be able to continue with his thoughts.

"Well?" the man asked suddenly, moving about on his knees as he smoothed the woman's chin with a bit of wood.

"What?" Zavyalov asked, startled.

"You've been standing here for a quarter of an hour. The least you could do is tell me what you think," the man said, still without raising his head.

"I'm no expert, but I think it's beautiful," Zavyalov said, turning to go. But the man spoke up again.

"Beautiful, you say... mm-m.... Why don't you ask me what the devil I'm doing it for?"

"I don't understand," Zavyalov began.

"You don't? That's a point in your favour. Three idiots have already asked me what I'm doing this for, knowing that in the morning it will be trampled on by bathers or kicked about by those young people who're always playing volleyball on the beach."

"Well, the danger is there of course. Shouldn't you make it smaller, perhaps?"

"Everything has to be the size it has to be," the man said, getting up to his feet. "A pyramid can't be small. The Sphinx must not be a statuette. And this thing here," he pointed with his bit of wood, "should not be small."

"You're probably right," Zavyalov agreed for the sake of politeness, and suddenly found himself asking: "Does this woman exist in real life?"

"And how!" the man exclaimed, and Zavyalov detected bitterness in his voice. "This, if you want to know, is my wife."

"A beautiful woman," Zavyalov said just to be polite again.

"She is? You think so?" the man asked, smoothing a line on the woman's neck with his big toe. "It means I have succeeded in making her that. However, she might have been more beautiful still. But I've lost her. I've lost a lot of things in my life, but this was the worst. When did you suffer your first loss? I don't mean a pocketknife, a wallet or a coat check."

"Thirteen years ago."

The fat man gave him a keen look.

"Frankly, I didn't expect you to be so accurate," he said. "You surprise me."

"Well, I'll be on my way," Zavyalov said, shrugging.  
"Good-night," the man said, watching him with the same keen look.

Zavyalov began to move off but the man called him, and he came back.

"I want to make you a present of this thing, this head here," the sculptor told him.

"You want to give it to me?"

"Sure. It's yours. I've almost finished it."

"But how will I . . ."

"No, no, I'm not suggesting that you take it away with you. But it's yours. I'm giving it to you."

"He's crazy," Zavyalov thought, and aloud he said: "Thank you."

"Go then. And I, if you don't mind, will stay and fix this ear up a bit. The lobe is rather too pointed. Don't wait for me. You've a special routine, I suppose. Go on. Good-night."

Alone, he paced along the beach again. It was perfectly quiet now. And it had become darker. The moon hardly showed through the veil of clouds.

The lone nocturnal swimmer had come out at last and was hopping on one leg and then the other to shake the water out of his ears.

Couples began to appear. The damp sand groaned softly under their feet as, arms about each other, they slowly walked by in the darkness.

A jet plane streaked high across the sky, making a sound that in ages past was made only by the wind and the sea in a terrible storm.

Again, the sand creaked audibly under the lovers' feet.

Zavyalov saw Lena, or rather guessed it was she, from afar. She was coming towards him, and the clouds moved aside a little to let the moon have a look at this lovely woman with the long slim legs and the shimmering red dress.

"I've been looking for you all night," she said. "The

picture ended long ago. I thought you said you weren't going down to the beach."

"Sorry, I changed my mind."

"I hope everything's all right again. Is it?" she asked, taking his arm.

"Afraid not."

"You must tell me what happened. Am I to blame for any of it?"

Zavyalov did not know what to tell her. What could he say to her without hurting her? The whole thing could be explained in a few words. But he couldn't get them out. He couldn't say them to her. To anyone else, even that sculptor chap, but not to her. She'd hardly believe him anyway. She'd think him a liar, most likely. Or a fool.

"It's very difficult for me to explain, Lena," he said. "But it's got nothing to do with you at all. It's simply that I saw something in that magazine that brought back memories. . . ."

"Is that all?" Lena cried with relief, tightening her hold on his arm. "Heavens, and I was afraid. . . ."

She led him along the beach talking without pause.

"I couldn't understand what had happened. I went over everything in my mind again and again, and knew there was nothing serious. You were all right all day, then suddenly you got a bee in your bonnet. . . ."

At first she chatted lightly, but little by little her tone grew irritable. Instinctively she was paying him back for causing her that unnecessary worry.

But she checked herself quickly: men do not like irritable, nagging women.

"Let's forget about it, shall we?" she said gently. "But to be quite honest you did ruin the evening for me. And for this you'll spend tomorrow night with me. We'll start out straight after supper and go a long way along the beach. To those fishermen. Remember?"

He did. . . .

They had started out when it was still light. A strong wind was blowing and the beach was deserted except

for some figures in beach robes reclining in the shelter of the dunes.

The wind had strained to tear off Lena's white frock and tousled her long, elaborately dressed hair. She had not taken a scarf, so she tied his large handkerchief around her head. Though tiny eddies of sand came whirling towards them, they walked on and on, with the cold, frothy sea slapping noisily against the beach to their right, and the dunes and woods stretching away to their left. There was nothing ahead of them, only the sand and the wind.

Dusk began to fall by the time they got to the fishermen. A net was stretched on stakes to dry, and two fishermen—an old man and a boy—were cooking a pot of soup over the fire. The wind, strangely, did not threaten the small flame. After standing before the fire for a while talking to the old Latvian, they started back the way they had come.

The wind blew against their backs now, the going was easier, but still they felt tired and sat down on the sand to rest. It was cold in the wind, and so they sought shelter in the dunes and lay down. They lay close together to get warm, and then it happened.

It was late when they got back to the rest home. All the doors were already locked for the night, and the milky-white tulip-shaped lamps cast a brilliant light on the front path. Zavyalov had to knock and waken one of the ward nurses, thrust some money into her hand and mumble something about their having gone to Riga and the train breaking down on the way back.

...And now he said: "Lena, we shan't be able to go anywhere tomorrow night."

"But why?" she asked, puzzled and hurt.

"Because I shan't be here tomorrow. I'm taking the morning plane."

Lena dropped the arm she had been holding so affectionately.

"How can you?"

Zavyalov fancied that in Lena's exclamation there was pain and anger at a man who, even if for only a short time, had been intimate with her—a woman who loved him, not too much perhaps, but still—and who was suddenly leaving her flat for no reason that she knew.

That's how it sounded to him. But Lena had nothing of the kind in mind. All she meant to express was anger at him for breaking the universally accepted rules of the game. She was disappointed, it's true. Her hopes of staying on longer were shattered; also, she would have to go about by herself for a whole week, since no new batch of vacationists would be arriving while she was there and there were no unattached males among the old lot: all those who had wished to and been free to do so had long found partners. She'd have to sit and mope in the company of middle-aged single women, and tell them stories about Zavyalov being urgently recalled to Moscow. And what was more, she would have to try and convince them that they had made a date in Moscow, in Gorky Street, in front of the Central Telegraph or perhaps the Yermolova Theatre.

Zavyalov, however, imagined that Lena was broken-hearted.

"Lena, forgive me," he said as tenderly as he could. "It was very good to be with you. But now everything has changed. I can't explain it all to you. . . ."

"You should, though," Lena said in a hard voice.

"Yes, of course, but I can't," he said quickly. "It would sound queer to you, like a lie. I'm not quite sure myself yet. . . ."

Lena caught his hands, pressed her body to his, and spoke quickly, excitedly: "You must not go. . . . Let's stay on. . . ."

He freed his hands gently, but deliberately.

"No, Lena. I can't. I know it's not fair to you, but you've got to believe me. I can't stay. I'll give you a ring in Moscow, if I may. I *have* to go tomorrow. I have to, you see."

She knew now that he would go. And there was nothing she could do about it. What a shame! But what could have happened? She wished she knew. What could he have seen in that old magazine? She had leafed through it first as they sat in the lounge, before giving it to him. Nothing of interest in it. An old April issue. With pages missing too. Someone had ripped them out. Had he made the whole thing up, was it just an excuse? He probably had a wife, someone had dropped her a word about their going about together, and she had sent him a telegram threatening to come down. . . .

No, it wasn't that. All letters and telegrams were stacked on a small table just outside the dining room before dinner. Lena always came down before Zavyalov to pick up her mail and see, while she was at it, if any other women were writing him.

There had been no letters from any women. He had only received two letters so far: one from Moscow and the other from Leningrad. Both were from men, so the return addresses said. He told her himself that one was from a student cousin, and the other from some chap who wanted to join the flying club. Could he have been getting letters *poste restante*? No, he never went to the post office as far as she knew. What was the matter then? O Lord, how insecure everything was in this life, one could never be sure of anything!

Obviously everything was finished. Good. There was no need now to hold herself in check, she could let herself go, tell him what she thought of him and proudly walk away.

She was all ready to begin when suddenly she tripped and fell.

Zavyalov helped her to her feet. Her heel was broken, she saw. Her high, thin, half-metal heel, the loveliest spike heel ever.

"Did you hurt yourself?" he asked solicitously.

"I've broken my heel," she said, bending down to take off her shoe.

And, before she knew it, she was sobbing her heart out. For once her tears were very bitter and genuine: she was sorry for herself, sorry for her imported slipper which couldn't be repaired at an ordinary shop. It would mean running about Riga, looking for a private shoemaker, and paying him whatever he asked. . . .

All at once Lena realised that there was no point in talking to Zavyalov any longer. She turned abruptly and hobbled home, sobbing and dangling the slipper in her hand. And now she did not look at all like an exotic goldfish, nor even like the beautiful long-legged woman Zavyalov had thought so attractive only a few hours ago.



## 2. TURN BACK THE CLOCK

Where should he go now? Back to the rest home? Back to where the milky-white lamps were burning, where people were still standing about on the flagstone paths, and where the sound of domino pieces being slapped down on the long-suffering table could be heard coming from the sunporch? Couples were still sitting out on the garden seats. When you walked past they gave you a long look. Lyuba and Tosya, two of the waitresses, were noisily pushing the tables together in the empty dining room, while two fat ward nurses in soiled white smocks, belted with lengths of gauze, were preparing to lock up for the night. Zavyalov's roommate, an accountant from Novosibirsk, who liked a drink of hot tea if he woke up in the middle of the night, must have already placed his thermos flask on the bedside table beside him, and gone to bed.

Must he go back to answer the man's questions about where he had been and what he had done, and then get into bed between the dampish sheets, put out the light, and lie awake in the darkness? For he knew sleep would not come to him that night.

Oh, if only he had a plane. One of those he had piloted many years ago. Never mind if it were full of bullet-holes so long as the fuel tank was intact. He'd be climbing up into the sky now and not shuffling along the path back to his room to join his accountant friend.

The clouds had covered the moon completely, making the darkness impenetrable. Probably it would rain

soon. The sound of the surf and the whistling wind brought back that night, that terrible dark night when he had stood squashed by the crowd storming the pier which was barely discernible in the darkness and where a ship had already berthed. That was on October 17, 1941. Something had apparently happened in Moscow the day before, but at that time he did not know what it was. Streams of people had suddenly flooded the highway running to the large Volga town where he chanced to stop on his way from Moscow to the fliers' school.

He had been there a week already, forced to break his journey because of a stupid, trifling illness: never having worn footcloths and top boots before, he had taken a size too large and had blistered his foot. It had become infected and he had had to spend five days in hospital. And for the last two days, he had been vainly trying to get passage on one of the boats.

She came up to him on the wharf where hundreds of people were pressing towards the closed ticket offices. He had on a shabby, used army coat and cap, and with his limp she may have taken him for a wounded front-line soldier who had a better chance of getting her a ticket.

She came up to him—a small, skinny girl with large tear-swollen eyes, dragging a suitcase strapped with a girl's narrow belt—and asked him to help her.

And he did help her. With a sudden influx of energy he shouldered his way into the line of soldiers and invalids, who stood leaning on crutches and sticks. A minute ago it would never have occurred to him to do this. He bought tickets for the girl and himself, and after that they left the wharf together and walked down the embankment. It was early morning, and ships only sailed at night in those days of war.

They spent the whole day together. She told him her name was Olga, she was seventeen and alone in the world. Her mother had died several years before, and her father had been killed at Smolensk. She had finished school that spring, had dreamed of enrolling

at the medical college in the autumn, but here she was trying to get to Astrakhan where she had an aunt.

He also told her all about himself. Within half an hour she knew that his name was Vladimir, that he was nineteen, that he too was a Muscovite, and that he too had been going to study. But when the war broke out, he asked to be sent to a fliers' school, and was on his way there now. He'd be a pilot in six months' time, that is, of course, if the Germans weren't beaten before then.

They felt that it was somehow comforting to be together in the drastically changed, unfriendly and cruel world, so they did not part all day. In the evening they were told that their ship would not sail until the following night. They had nowhere to sleep, and sat until daybreak on a bench in the small wretched garden near the wharf.

In the night, Vladimir tried clumsily to embrace her. He wanted to deceive himself and Olga into believing that he was doing it only to protect her from the cold, that he was touching her only to raise the collar of her thin summer coat. His wooden, unbending fingers touched her for a moment and withdrew in haste. There was nothing he would not do to make her feel warm and comforted, to keep her safe from danger, to take her away from this garden, from the dark into the light, back to the old, familiar, compassionate life.

He begged her to sleep, to doze for a little while at least, to rest her head on his shoulder or in his lap. He promised he would not stir while she slept. Or if she liked she could make herself comfortable on the bench and he'd sit on his haversack at her feet on the ground. But she said no, no, she couldn't sleep on such a night.

"What will happen now?" she asked him. "Vladimir, what will happen now?"

And he answered her in the very words one heard so often in those days, weeks and months.

"All this is only temporary. Soon a decision will be taken... reserves will come in... and then..."

Olga said nothing. She also believed that that was how it would be.

"And then everything will come back?" she asked after a pause.

"Everything will come back, everything!" Vladimir cried and stopped short: his voice sounded too loud, too jubilant for that troubled night.

Drops of rain fell on Olga's face and he brushed them away with his palm.

"Feeling cold?" he asked very softly, in a whisper almost.

"No, I'm quite warm," she answered barely audibly.

"I know you're cold," he insisted. "Shall I take off my coat and wrap it around you?"

"No, goodness no, I'm really warm. I did feel a bit cold at first, but I'm quite warm now."

Still, he got up, quickly took off his coat and covered Olga with it. She struggled, pushing at it with her hands and reiterating: "No, no, you'll catch cold." But then she submitted, dropped her arms and let him wrap it around her. He was left with nothing on but his cotton summer tunic.

It got soaked through very quickly, but he felt neither the wet nor the cold. He was holding Olga's small, reddened hands in his, he felt the warmth coming back into them, and was happier than he had ever been in his life. He suddenly knew that he had something important to tell her, something terribly important. But he could not express it in words, he did not even know what exactly he wanted to say, he only felt the urge to speak. He looked steadily at her, hoping she would understand without words that he wanted to tell her something very important, only he didn't know how.

He did not know it was love. He just did not try to give a name to what he felt. He'd had crushes on girls before, and liked to think sometimes that he was really in love. But after one date he'd know that it was all over, that he was not in love and never had been, and that he'd much rather go skating with the boys, if it

was winter, or to the Dynamo Stadium, if it was summer, than stay at home waiting for the girl to ring him up.

He was too young to know that the first symptom of real love is a desire to make yourself responsible for another's fate, and to take on the responsibility gladly because it is not a burden but happiness.

And though he did not know yet that it was love, Vladimir was already prepared to do anything, whatever it cost him, just so she wouldn't feel cold, so the raindrops would not fall on her face, so she would smile and not feel afraid any more.

But he was powerless. All he could do was brush away the raindrops from her face with the palm of his hand, keep the collar of her thin, flimsy coat upturned, and whisper brokenly into her ear that it would soon be over—the war, the darkness and the cold. That the milling crowd with all those suitcases, bags and bundles would soon disperse, and people would again become ordinary citizens, the kind one met in the street every hour of the day, calmly going about their business, and then returning home, switching on the lights and turning on the radio. And that everything would be the way it had always been in ordinary life.

The night passed, and when the cold autumn sun came out they saw that overnight the garden had become a Gypsy camp. Only instead of Gypsies flaunting their colourful rags there were people in conventional city clothes sitting on the benches, on suitcases and bundles or on blankets spread out on the wet ground, and their coats, trousers, skirts, boots, shoes and slippers were spattered with mud. Someone was trying to light a fire but the wind blowing from the Volga kept putting it out.

Vladimir and Olga held tight on to their end of the bench. She stayed guard while he made a quick trip into town to buy them something to eat. He brought back some bread, a few pickled cucumbers and some apples. At noon it was Olga's turn to get food. Vladimir

sat on the bench waiting for her and anxiously watching the road.

And so another day passed. It seemed to them that they had known each other all their lives, and she had no one closer in the world than him, and he had no one closer than her. Another night came. The people who had camped in the garden and those who had just arrived from town were now crowded together on the wharf. The blacked-out ship, invisible in the night, started its engines and the great human wave rolled forward towards the landing stage.

Someone, in falling, gave Vladimir a hard push in the back. He let go Olga's hand and lost her at once, separated from her by the moving human wall. They were carried like bits of flotsam in different directions.

"Olga!" he shouted, but no one answered him. He shouted again and again, and getting no answer began to elbow his way out of the crowd in a frenzy of despair.

He thought the stream had carried her forward to the landing stage where dim lights were winking, and he set out in that direction, blindly fighting his way through.

People pushed and cursed him, but he felt and heard nothing, calling out again and again: "Olga! Olga!" His unhappy voice was so strong that it rang out above the other voices, above the whistling of the wind, the breaking of the waves and the squelch of the mud under countless feet.

Suddenly something snapped and crashed, and the crowd carried Vladimir forward, to the river, on to the landing stage, past the up-ended broken barrier, past the furiously cursing sailors who were still trying to hold back the human avalanche.

Vladimir realised he was on board the ship only when he felt the railing pressing painfully into his chest. He shouted: "Olga! Are you there? Olga!" But he got no answer.

The ship cast off and plunged into the darkness. The landing stage, which people were still storming,

receded into the gloom. Gradually the noise made by the engines and the screw propeller as it ploughed up the water drowned out the yelling on the bank.

He could not take a step, he could not even move. Breathing was difficult, and his sore foot, injured further in the crush, hurt terribly. The wound must have opened, and it felt as if a red-hot coal had got into his boot and was burning through the flesh, right down to the bone. But all he could think of was Olga.

He tried to persuade himself that she was on board, on deck or below, and that he would find her as soon as he could move.

Little by little the tension eased, people relaxed and settled down on their bags and bundles.

Asking his bearded neighbour to keep an eye on his haversack, Vladimir started moving along the deck, carefully stepping over those who were lying down and walking around those sitting or standing.

He called out Olga's name again. No answer. Only the water churned noisily. A baby began to cry. And the cold wind whistled.

Vladimir moved along with enormous difficulty. People with their luggage took up the whole deck, they were everywhere. He tripped over them, fell down, was pushed, shoved and hissed at from the darkness: "Where d'you think you're going? Can't you see there are people here?" It must have taken him a full hour to get to the other end of the deck.

He did not find her. His last remaining hope was that he would find her below, in the hold.

But he did not find her either in the hold or in any of the cabins. He looked everywhere. When, soaked in sweat and barely able to drag his numb leg which curiously had stopped hurting, he got back on deck and into the icy wind which flung stinging sprays of water at the people huddled there, he understood at last that Olga was not on the ship.

The crowd must have pushed her back and back, jostling and squeezing her out, leaving her behind on

that dark, dirty wharf. And the ship was taking him further and further away from her. . . .

He vividly imagined her getting knocked down and calling him as she lay on the ground. He made a dash for the railing. . . .

A man pushed him aside, roughly and silently, and he saw the utter senselessness of his impulse. He sat down on his haversack. He would have liked to stretch out on the deck just where he was, but there was no room. It grew still colder. He raised the collar of his coat, dropped his head and clutched it in his hands. It came to him only now that he had lost Olga for good, for ever, because he did not know either her surname or her address.

He sat without moving, a stranger to everyone, a lonely, unwanted boy who had so unexpectedly found and so irrevocably lost his first real love.

Months would pass, and he would change, he would become a different man. He would mature in the ranks, among men fighting for their country and their life. He would come to know the joy of victory and the horror of impending death, the warmth of a friend's hand, the gratifying knowledge that he had performed his duty, and impotent rage at the realisation that the enemy was the better armed. He would know how heavy weighed one's responsibility for the safety of one's own country and the rest of the world.

He would spend nights without sleep beside the fighter planes, ready to take off at a sign from the commander, live in dugouts flooded with stagnant water, and ride in lorries over the wartime fascine roads. His eyes would get used to the light of oil lamps, carbide lamps, lanterns, and the bursts of tracer bullets. He would fly, he would shoot at enemy planes, he would pilot a burning plane and bale out, and then crawl on his belly all night, the next night and the next, making his way to his own people. He would experience everything.

But that night, sitting on the deck, he did not know that life had many more trials in store for him, he did



not know that he would find Olga only to lose her again, and this time for ever. For those who perish in the flames of a burning plane do not come back to life.

He had reconciled himself to the thought that Olga was dead, and he would never have believed that she had survived if he had not seen her picture in that old magazine a few hours ago.

He knew then that he had never stopped loving her just as he had never stopped thinking of his flying days. He only imagined that he had gotten over her.

Their not being together all those long years was his fault, he suddenly realised. He should have started a search for her long ago.

He tried to drive away the bitter thought. It's all a matter of chance, he told himself. I couldn't know that she was alive. And if it hadn't been for that magazine. . . . And promptly argued back: You could have known! You just took things too calmly. You didn't look around you. You made no attempt to find her. Everything about you was moving, and you stood still. You did. And please don't make up any excuses, don't say that you've been working to the best of your ability and discharging your small duties faithfully. To the best of your ability, my foot. Drop it, Zavyalov, don't quibble, this "best of your ability" stuff was all your own idea, it's your injured pride that determined what your "best" should be. Your attitude was too resigned and torpid, yes, that's right, if you hadn't been half asleep you'd have found her earlier, you'd have seen traces of her.

Once again he tried to chase the painful thoughts away with the help of logic and plain common sense. Still, they haunted him. Logic was powerless here.

A nostalgia for his plane, for the sky—a feeling he thought he had overcome—now took hold of him again. Closing his eyes, he saw the front-line airfield, the machines camouflaged with chopped-down branches and half-hidden in the forest, and heard the ringing voice of the mechanic reporting his plane's readiness. He walked to the plane and with habitual ease put on and

tightened the parachute straps, feeling the familiar weight press down on his shoulders. Then he hoisted himself up on to the wing with one jerk and, holding on to the edge of the cockpit, swung his legs over the side and settled down in the seat. His right hand was gripping the joy stick already, but his left missed something. What was it? The throttle, of course.

Bending down, he groped in the darkness, found a smooth oblong pebble, picked it up and held it. It gave him the familiar feeling he wanted.

Now he was ready to take off. It seemed to him that he was opening his eyes and seeing again the grey pre-dawn sky and the air strip, covered with green dew-wet grass, running away into the distance. He seemed to hear the roar of the engine. With all his being he felt the delicious sensation of gathering speed as the plane took off. . . .

The next morning he left for Moscow.

### 3. THE BEGINNING OF THE ROAD

**N**o one met him.

He had a lot of friends once. Then he had a wife and no friends because she didn't like them and they didn't like her.

In days gone past, when his train steamed into Moscow he always stuck his head out of the window because he could not wait to see who was there to meet him. But then his friends stopped coming, only his wife came, and he did not stick his head out of the window any more or rush to the door. On the contrary, he took his time about collecting his luggage, not starting till the train came to a stop.

He knew that his wife would be there waiting on the platform because she made it a rule to see him off when he went on business or on leave, and to meet him when he came back, thrusting out her painted lips for him to kiss very lightly so the lipstick would not smear.

They did not get on, sometimes they did not talk for weeks, but if he were going away she always took him to the station or the airfield and was there to meet him when he returned. And, knowing the whole routine by heart, he went forward to meet her with dragging steps.

After she had finally left him—not that she had ever been “with him”—there was no one to meet him at all. It hurt him bitterly for a long time, and he took even longer to collect his belongings so he would be the last to leave the train and thus be spared the sight of the welcome and kisses given to others.

But this time, he was not conscious of his loneliness. He was obsessed with the thought of Olga who was alive, alive, alive! It was a miracle, one of those miracles he had heard of or read about after the war. There were really extraordinary cases: soldiers rose from their graves to find their mothers and fathers, and fathers, defying the eyewitnesses who had seen them die, rose from the shell-holes that were already brimming with swamp water, from quagmire, from the rubble of bomb-demolished houses, from the scorched fields pocked with shrapnel, from the settling powder smoke. They came back from non-existence to embrace their already greying sons and daughters and hold their unknown grandchildren in their arms.

In his pocket Zavyalov had the magazine page with Olga's picture. It belonged to a series of photographs combined under the general title: "The Country's May Day Preparations."

Included in the series was a picture of some men standing in front of a forging furnace, another of collective farmers grouped before the farm office, and one more of some fishermen on the deck of a seiner.

The photograph with Olga in it was in the right-hand bottom corner of the page. She was almost hidden from view by the people who stood in front of her. An old man wearing an overcoat with a fur collar, and a woman whose hair stuck out from under her hat, had pushed her into the background. But all the same Zavyalov could not have made a mistake. It was her face. Olga's face.

They were standing on snow-covered ground in front of a long squat building, obviously listening to someone delivering a speech. That someone was not in the picture. The photographer had caught the keen attention on their faces splendidly. He had also got the sunset well. Even in this small picture you could see that it was a beautiful sunset.

But where was it taken? In what town? Or village? In the north, the south, or the east of the country? Who were those people with Olga? The caption said

that meetings were being held throughout the country, and that people engaged in socialist emulation were taking on increased assignments in honour of May Day. Well, this was obviously one such meeting. And since they were usually held at factories, farms and other enterprises, the photograph could be traced, the enterprise in question easily located, and the whole thing cleared up.

There was snow on the ground. A meeting in preparation for May Day and snow.... So it was in the north, most likely. But if it was taken in March there would be snow everywhere, even in Moscow.

It was late when he got home. He hurried through the hall. The floor was strewn with newspapers and magazines delivered in his two weeks' absence. He came back, picked up his mail and dumped the untidy heap on his desk. Without sitting down, he glanced through the newspapers, reading only the headlines. Perhaps at the bottom of his heart he cherished an obscure hope, a vague belief that he would see something that might have a bearing on what now possessed his mind entirely.

The headlines flashed past his eyes: "Everything Must Be Done to Implement the Decisions of the 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U.", "Draft Law on State Pensions", "Fresh Attempts to Fan Anti-Communist Hysteria in the U.S.A.", "Irkutsk Hydropower Station Builders Have Started on the Pontoon Bridge Across the Angara", "An Act of Hostile Provocation Staged by the Agents of Imperialism in Poznan".... The pages rustled on. An envelope got knocked aside and fell on the floor. He picked it up. It was addressed to "Pilot Zavyalov. Nikitsky Boulevard. Moscow".

"Pilot Zavyalov," he repeated. "What the devil?"

He ripped open the envelope and pulled out the folded piece of paper closely covered with writing. Oh, it's that boy, Pavel Shevlyagin, again. He had already had a letter from him at the rest home. It was amazing how he found out one's addresses. A funny chap. With lots of freckles on his nose, but none at all

on his cheeks or forehead. He worked as a fitter at some plant or other. He was crazy to join the flying club but they wouldn't admit him. Still, he kept coming there. He stuck around at the airfield and watched the others fly. "Let's see what he's got to say this time," Zavyalov said, beginning to read the letter.

"Dear Comrade Pilot Zavyalov,

"I'm addressing this letter to you personally because you're a wartime flier and you'll understand what it means to want something with all your soul.

"I've been to the reception office of the Supreme Soviet Chairman in Mokhovaya Street, but I didn't get to see him. I spoke to a young man who hasn't even been in the war and could never understand. He told me to apply again to the district military commissariat. But, Comrade Zavyalov, you know, don't you, how many times I've applied there!

"All the fellows keep telling me that if only you'd put in a word for me. . . ."

Zavyalov did not read to the end. The lad had been pestering him for a good six months now. But what could he do if the military commissariat refused to give him an admission card to the club?

He was a good lad, though. But he looked rather seedy. And he was very short. You could see the military commissariat's point: there were many applicants, some of them fine athletes, physically fit, hardy chaps. . . .

Zavyalov dropped the letter on the desk. He pushed his suitcase under the bed. The newspapers would keep until tomorrow.

As he got into bed he thought: "It's a good thing I came back before my leave was up. I have twelve more days. You can do a lot in twelve days if you don't waste time." But it was a long time before he fell asleep and he was awake at six. Too early to go to the *Looch* office, and so he stayed in bed, wide awake but with his eyes closed, until it was time to go.

A black nameplate on the door said ILLUSTRATIONS. Zavyalov knocked, pushed the door open, and saw a room lined with bookcases. He did not immediately notice the woman sitting at the small cluttered desk to the right of the door.

"May I?" he asked, still standing on the other side of the threshold. "D'you know where I can find Comrade Korostyleva? The secretary told me she's the person I want to see."

"I am Korostyleva."

The woman raised her head. She was past middle age. There were streaks of grey in her hair.

Zavyalov walked over to her desk, and said falteringly: "I've come on rather unusual business, you see...."

"Do sit down," the woman said. Her voice was gentle and low. She swept up the photographs lying on the chair, and Zavyalov sat down.

"It's like this," he spoke as calmly as he could. "A few days ago, the day before yesterday actually, I came across your magazine, and in it there was...I may have imagined it...I may have been mistaken, of course, but..." He fell silent, embarrassed by his increasing incoherence.

"Well, what was it you saw?" Korostyleva said in the wheedling tones of a doctor speaking to a tongue-tied patient. "What was it you saw?" she repeated. "A picture of a relative, perhaps? Was it?"

"How...how did you know?"

"Why, it's a common occurrence," she said and smiled. "Very often a face in a magazine or a newsreel makes people think it's a friend or relative whom they thought dead or missing. And then they apply to us. They telephone, write, and come here in person. We're quite used to it. Well then, who was it you saw?"

"A girl. It's been a long time. Almost thirteen years. I was sure she was dead, killed at the front, and now here was her photo."

"You could easily be mistaken. After all, it's been so many years." Korostyleva now spoke in the tones of a doctor reassuring a nervous patient.

Zavyalov frowned. He had expected her to say just that. He knew she'd try to reason with him, to persuade him that he had made a mistake.

"I haven't made a mistake," he told her flatly. "I couldn't have."

"All right, we'll see. In any case we'll do all we can to help you."

"Thank you," Zavyalov said. "And now I'll show you the picture."

He took the neatly folded magazine page from his coat pocket, smoothed it out on the desk in front of Korostyleva, and putting his finger on the picture in the bottom right-hand corner, said: "There."

"I see," Korostyleva said, glancing quickly down the page. "What issue is it?"

"April this year," Zavyalov hastened to explain. "See, I've got it here, on the reverse. It's the April 1956 issue. No. 7."

"Excellent," Korostyleva said.

"D'you mean to say you can find out where that picture was taken?" he asked excitedly.

"Certainly. No trouble at all. All we have to do is glance through the negatives belonging to this issue."

Saying this, she got up and walked to one of the bookcases. Hardly breathing, Zavyalov followed her every movement with his eyes. She opened the door and behind it he saw long rows of small drawers.

Pulling at the one she wanted, Korostyleva ran through the white envelopes standing upright inside, flipping them back as swiftly as a bank teller counting money. Every now and again she paused, took out an envelope and put it on the table.

"That's the lot," she said, pushing in the drawer and closing the door. "And now let's see what we've got



here," she said, picking up the first envelope. "No, this is not it, I'm afraid. . . ."

Zavyalov looked at the tiny photo pasted on the outside of the envelope. No, it wasn't the one he wanted. But it was the right series. This was the seiner photo. The next was the forging furnace scene. And the third. . . .

"Here!" Zavyalov cried out, bringing his open hand down on the envelope as if it were a butterfly that might fly off for ever.

"You see how simple everything is," Korostyleva said with a smile. "Now, take your hand away, let's see what it says here."

Zavyalov raised the envelope to his eyes. Written on it in a large clear hand was: "May Day Emulation. I. Ivanov."

"What can it possibly mean?" he asked, puzzled, and handed the envelope to Korostyleva.

Her scrutiny of the caption seemed to him unreasonably long.

"Hm-m. Very strange," she said at last.

"What is? What is very strange?" he asked impatiently.

She did not reply. Opening the envelope, she drew out a small bit of film and looked at it, holding it up to the light.

"There's no mistake," she told him finally. "Take a look."

Yes, it was the picture he meant, he only had to take one glance at the film to know.

"But where was it taken?" he cried in exasperation.

"You see," Korostyleva said slowly, in some embarrassment it seemed. "What we have here is obviously an amateur job, though a very good one, I must say. The sunset is excellent. I. Ivanov," she said musingly. "We have no I. Ivanov on the staff. But it makes no difference, of course. His address and the name of the place where the picture was taken should have been on the envelope. Strange . . . there's nothing here except his name and the caption. . . ."

She stood up abruptly and with a hasty "I'll be back in a minute" left the room.

Keyed up though he was, Zavyalov did not for a minute doubt that everything would be cleared up at once.

He could not sit still, and so he began to read the square white tabs on the thick mock-leather files stacked on the shelves running the length of the opposite wall. "Industry", "Theatre", "History of Aviation", "Party Congresses", "Army", "First Five-Year Plan", "Collectivisation".

He took a few steps up and down the room. Then he went out into the corridor and lit a cigarette. Which way had Korostyleva gone? Would she reappear from the left or the right? Should he go and look for her?

Someone was coming. No, they were the heavy footsteps of a man. The lift door clanged shut. All was silent again.

It seemed hours before Korostyleva returned.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," she said apologetically. "There's been a slight mix-up, I'm afraid. I'll explain it all to you in a few words. You see, these things do happen sometimes. When we get a letter from an amateur photographer with a snapshot enclosed, the whole thing goes to the Letters from Readers department who simply turn the picture over to us without showing us the letter which they put on file. We don't really handle the thing, you see. The other day an order to this effect was issued by the editor-in-chief. Naturally, whoever got the photo from the Letters from Readers department should have taken down all the pertinent data contained in the letter, but..."

Zavyalov listened to her explanations with mounting irritation. What did he care about their routine? All he wanted to know was the address or the name of the town, village or whatever it was where the snapshot was taken. He wasn't interested in any of these details....

"I've just been to the Letters from Readers department, but they couldn't find the letter," she continued. "Evidently there was nothing of any special interest in it. Except the photo, of course. But I'm sure they'll trace the letter eventually. Unless they've simply given it to one of our staff without bothering to register it first.... Anyway, I wish you'd call again tomorrow."

"Very well," Zavyalov said mechanically.

"We'll be able to tell you everything then. I'm very sorry about this. But there's no danger of a mix-up like that happening again. The chief editor, you see, has issued an order to the effect...."

"I'll be here tomorrow," Zavyalov told her.

#### 4. TALL GRASS AND STARS

**T**ime that hangs heavy on your hands becomes burdensome indeed.

As he walked out of the *Looch* office, Zavyalov suddenly realised that he had nothing to do until the next day. Only the night before he had revelled in the thought that he had twelve whole days ahead of him to do with as he liked. And now his enforced idleness irked him.

He came to a cinema which showed old favourites. He often went there, wishing to see all the pictures that were released during his pilot years. He wanted to turn back the clock or make time stand still for an hour. He wanted to feel a real man again, if only while the picture lasted. Authenticity was what he sought—in faces, clothes, streets, cars and aeroplanes. Pictures made in his school years or during the war were his best choice. He knew their plots by heart, but it wasn't the stories that interested him. As a matter of fact, he hardly followed them. He liked the parts filmed on location, especially if it was some place in Moscow which he had known all his life.

The sight of Gorky Street as it was twenty years ago made his heart ache with nostalgia and then he gave free rein to his deliciously hurtful imagination. He fancied he was back in his childhood or his youth, and again lived through some incident, some episode in his life which was of little significance in itself and was only important to him because it had really happened.

He saw himself striding along the stretch of Gorky Street that was being shown on the screen, past those houses which have since been either pulled down or pushed back into the rear, on his way to keep a date with some girl waiting for him at the next corner. The girl would be wearing a beret, like most of the girls in the thirties, and a long narrow skirt which was the fashion then.

Looking at the people shown walking along the pavement—people who belonged to the time when he too was a real man—he tried to grasp the thing that made them look different from people today.

It was a funny thing. Looking at old, time-yellowed snapshots taken before the Revolution or during the Civil War, or watching old films, you saw that there was something in the clothes, hair style and faces of the people then that could never be reproduced effectively afterwards.

In pictures about the past made today, the characters never looked exactly like their prototypes in spite of all the efforts of the producer, dress designer and make-up man. Time left its own imprint on people. One would think that anything could be reproduced: a street, pedestrians, women, children, soldiers, their clothes and hair styles. And yet there was that elusive something that could not be recaptured.

Only in films made by contemporaries did the miracle happen: watching the sequences you actually lived your childhood and youth again.

For Zavyalov everything assumed an enormous significance—every inch of ground over which the people in the picture walked and which bore an invisible imprint of his own feet, every brick of those since demolished houses, every show-window of the now non-existent shops. He was sure the shots were made on that particular day, evening or night when he too was there among the crowd—he remembered exactly where he was going, and what happened when he got there.

He remembered where he went the next day too, and how he met her afterwards. Where was she now?

Together they walked down that street to that house over there—it wasn't in the picture but it would certainly have been if the cameraman had shifted his camera a little to the left.

People sitting around him laughed at the comic turns—those houses and streets had no special meaning for them. They were too young.

They and Zavyalov may have been watching different pictures. It was a personal film he saw. He was the only one there who saw it that way. But he wasn't really among the audience. He was *there*, walking along that street and mingling with the crowd. He was up *there*.

And here he was right by the cinema. The picture showing that day was about fliers. He walked in and bought a ticket. All he wanted was to kill time.

But the sight of fliers and planes stirred up his memories with redoubled force. There was a front-line airfield, pilots, and girls in flying suits. . . .

He closed his eyes and saw her there before him. Not the girl he first met on the Volga wharf, nor the woman in that magazine picture. Quite a different Olga. . . .

It was in 1943. Zavyalov was already a fighter pilot, a lieutenant, and he had been wounded twice, both mere scratches that had been taken care of at the field hospital. By that time he had already brought down three enemy planes and had received his first order, the Order of the Red Star. There were only seven of them standing in line when the division commander pinned the order on his chest. Eight of them, counting the commander. All that remained of their regiment.

The next day they were ordered to fly into the deep rear to collect new planes since by that time they had no aircraft left: all their LAGs were scattered in bits and ashes over the ground.

A lorry was to take them the sixty kilometres to the attack bomber airfield. There they were to board

a transport plane and fly to the Urals for the new machines.

On the screen before Zavyalov a small lorry was speeding along a wartime road. Several jolly young fliers stood up in the back, holding on to one another. But what Zavyalov really saw was another lorry, other fliers, himself among them.

He served on the Northern Front, a marshy place where the roads were rarely dry and good firm ground for an airfield was hard to find. It was no picnic for the infantry sticking it out in dugouts, pill-boxes and trenches filled with water most of the time.

The motor roads in those parts had to be built on fascines: an endless row of logs was laid at a slant along a clearing in the woods, with deep drainage ditches on either side. It was along one of these roads they were going to drive to the airfield that day.

They started to pack early in the morning. They were going to fly into another world, back to a life left behind long ago. They would be staying for a while and must take everything a man in the rear needed. Some had forgotten what those things were. So they packed linen and celluloid undercollars, lots of plexiglass cigarette-holders and knives with plexiglass handles—a new craze among army men. They buckled shoulder belts to their waist belts—a thing they never did when in battle dress. They put on their greatcoats and packed their waterproof capes, filled flasks with vodka, and polished their boots to a high sheen. . . .

And now they were in the back of the lorry on the way to the attack bomber airfield. They crawled along at ten kilometres an hour over the fascine road—not the smooth highway shown on the screen. The engine kept overheating, and when the water boiled the driver grabbed a squashed, rusty bucket and dashed into the woods to look for a pool, puddle, or water-filled shell-hole. Then on they bumped again over the ribbed road, until the lookout yelled: "Planes!" They leapt off the lorry and made for cover among the trees. The driver

stayed where he was. He knew he'd get hopelessly bogged if he left the fascine road.

The tedious trip didn't bother Zavyalov. He was in a very good mood. He was young and he'd already won the Order of the Red Star. His fighting glory had given him wings, he actually heard the flutter of them. They were carrying him to the rear, to a big town where there was no blackout, where the girls went about in ordinary or rather extraordinary civilian clothes, where there were cinemas and clubs too, he supposed, where people danced. He saw himself standing before the prettiest girl in the hall, his medal gleaming softly, bowing to her and saying, "May I have this dance?" and the girl saying shyly, "With pleasure, but I'm a hopeless dancer." And he, gallantly, "Oh, never! You don't know how hopeless I am!"

But none of this happened.

What did happen was all the more wonderful for its unexpectedness. It's only in fairy tales and operas that wonders give warning of their coming. The stage grows dark, lightning flashes, thunder peals in the distance, gusts of wind bend the trees to the ground, all the brass instruments in the orchestra blare out and the drums roll. . . .

Zavyalov had no such warning. Here he was jolting along in the lorry with his comrades on the cursed fascine road built in the woods which gunfire had crippled and charred, with never an inkling that a miracle was about to happen in less than five minutes' time. From afar they saw a huge meadow—a half-kilometre across and a kilometre and a half long—with ILs parked along the sides, about fifty metres apart, their tails and fuselages thrust into the shadow of the thick trees framing the airfield.

It was already growing dark. The planes must have just returned from their combat mission. Mechanics in greasy blue overalls were carefully camouflaging them with branches. A fuelling truck was crawling across the meadow over wheeltracks worn in the grass. A second stood beside a bomber with its hose snaking



along the wing on which a mechanic squatted. Simonyuk, their commander, poked his head out of the window of the cabin as they came abreast the bomber, and shouted: "I say, how do we get to your Command Post?"

"Drive straight on," the mechanic answered without looking round.

The driver stepped on the gas, the lorry leapt forward and in that same instant the squatting mechanic straightened up and turned round.

It was Olga.

Zavyalov knew her at once, and shouting "Olga! Olga!" at the top of his voice, jumped down to the ground and ran to her.

Standing on that huge wing she looked so small and so different in those men's clothes, her face was smeared with grease, a strand of hair fell over her eyes, and yet he knew her the moment she turned round.

She also recognised him at once. "Vladimir!" she shouted, and jumped down straight into his arms.

The lorry drew to a stop and Simonyuk opened the door and leaned out.

"What's going on, Lieutenant?"

"I've met an old friend, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel," Zavyalov called back.

"All right, say hullo to her and be quick about it."

Simonyuk slammed the door shut, and the lorry moved on.

Vladimir and Olga still stood beside the plane and he seemed unable to release his hold on her.

All his thoughts of a minute ago, all his silly, ridiculous daydreams about the trip into the rear and the girls he'd meet there and dance with were immediately dispelled.

He was gripping her thin shoulders convulsively with hard, rigid fingers.

"Mind your uniform, I'm all greasy," she said softly, and smiled.

He had not kissed her in that first moment, and he did not dare do it now that the driver of the fuelling truck and the mechanics, who had stopped their camouflaging business, were all staring at them.

He took his hands off her shoulders. She bent down, pulled out some grass and quickly rubbed the grease off her hands. He was unable to utter a word. He was choking for breath.

"You . . . here?" he gasped at last. And she answered: "Yes, Vladimir." He cried out in despair: "But I've got to go away!" "Oh, it's you then the Douglas is coming to collect!" she said. "I know. We're expecting it."

He forgot everything, he forgot that a war was on, that he was a pilot, and that life in wartime obeyed its own logic and its own hard laws. He was simply Vladimir Zavyalov again, a boy just out of school, he was in love, she was here and his life belonged to her. . . .

"Zavyalov, come on," he heard a shout, and tearing his gaze away from Olga turned round and saw First Lt. Kolyshev, one of their group, waving to him.

"Where shall I find you?" he whispered to Olga.

"I'll find you myself."

He ran to Kolyshev.

At the Command Post dugout the pilots sat down on benches running the length of the walls. Lt.-Col. Simonyuk and the Commander of the attack bombers' regiment took the short bench behind the crude table on which burnt a carbide lamp—that wonderful achievement of front-line lighting technique. The Commander informed them that the Douglas was not due until the following morning. They would therefore have to spend the night here.

It was almost dark when they came out of the dugout. The trees surrounding the airfield had already thrown their shadows across the dusty grass crushed by the wheels of the planes, the fuel tankers and the lorries.

Zavyalov and his comrades stood about waiting for the quartermaster who was supposed to squeeze them into the already crowded dugouts for the night.

The delay was a sore disappointment. Everyone wanted to push on to Moscow, to the peaceful towns beyond.

Zavyalov alone welcomed it.

With the rest of his group he stood at the entrance to the dugout, shuffling his feet impatiently and anxiously looking about him.

Olga was nowhere in sight. And then the quartermaster came and led them away.

It was dark in the small, cramped dugout where Zavyalov was to spend the night. The quartermaster snapped on his flashlight and Zavyalov saw that two men were already sleeping on the narrow plank bed.

The quartermaster shook one of them awake and asked him to move over and make room for Zavyalov. The man muttered something sleepily and moved up, leaving a little space next to the wall.

Thanking the flier, Zavyalov told the quartermaster that he didn't feel like turning in just yet and would go outside for a while.

He stood leaning against the sloping wooden roof of the dugout. Bursts of artillery fire came from afar, a crimson glow flared up here and there in the dark, faintly star-speckled sky, and from somewhere came the rumbling sound of an invisible U-2.

Suddenly he heard a man's voice: "Waiting, are you?"

An officer was coming towards him from the darkness.

"I am," Zavyalov answered. "But just what do you mean?"

The man came up close and now Zavyalov was able to make out the two orders of the Red Banner on his chest and the three small stars on his shoulder pieces.

The man raised his hand to his cap and rattled off his name: "First Lieutenant Voronin."

Zavyalov replied with a salute: "Lieutenant Zavyalov."

Neither said anything more for a minute or two.

"Why aren't you asleep, Lieutenant?" Voronin then asked abruptly.

"It's too stuffy inside. I like it here."

"You're lying," Voronin told him. "You're waiting for Olga."

Zavyalov flushed hotly.

"What . . . what business is it of yours?" he mumbled perplexedly.

"It is my business, never you mind why," Voronin snapped. "What did you come here for? To wait for the plane that will fly you east or to chase our girls? If it's the plane, go inside and sleep, it will be here tomorrow. Get me?"

Zavyalov clenched his fists. He was in a towering rage. But he wasn't sure which of the two he was madder with—Voronin for speaking to him in that tone of voice, or Olga for giving this Voronin person some sort of right to meddle in her private life.

"I'll thank you not to lecture me!" Zavyalov meant it to sound harsh and dignified, but instead his voice rose shrilly.

"I will lecture you if I have to," Voronin said. "What are you after? A bit of fun during your stopover?"

Zavyalov took a step forward and confronted Voronin. He stared hard into the man's unblinking eyes set in a narrow face with a scar above the left eyebrow.

"Who gave you the right to . . ." Zavyalov began beligerently.

"The Lord God Himself," Voronin broke in with a sneer. "The Lord God Himself gave me the right. Get it?"

"Why do you use that tone with me?" Zavyalov demanded angrily. "What is she to you?"

"She belongs to my squadron. She services my plane."

"Your plane but not you, surely?" Zavyalov blurted out and immediately felt horribly ashamed of himself.

"I'm afraid you haven't been horsewhipped often enough, Lieutenant," Voronin said. His words were reflective, tinged with regret. "I knew the sort of a bird you were at once. And she'd come running to you! 'Where have you put the Lieutenant?' she keeps asking everybody. She doesn't even know your name properly, but she's all ready to run to you in the middle of the

night. Only we won't stand for it. See? Think you're smart, but she's not that sort of girl. Not a man here would ever dare lay a finger on her. Understand?"

Zavyalov's resentment evaporated at once, his clenched fingers relaxed, and the blood receded from his face.

"You've got it all wrong, Lieutenant," he said.

"Don't dodge."

"I'm not. I knew Olga before. Before the war. We got separated and lost touch. And suddenly we met here. Quite by accident."

"Tell me another," Voronin said morosely.

"No, Voronin, it's the truth. That night on the ship I almost jumped overboard to swim back to her. . . ."

Zavyalov fell silent. That would not tell Voronin anything. But apparently the emotion in his voice if not the words did tell him something for he seemed to go limp all of a sudden and even his shoulders drooped.

"Vladimir, are you there?" Olga's voice broke the silence.

She appeared suddenly from the darkness, detaching herself, as it were, from the deep shadow of the pine forest.

"He's here all right, your Vladimir," Voronin called back glumly. "His full name is Vladimir Zavyalov, by the way. . . ."

"Oh, it's you, Comrade Lieutenant," Olga said shyly, and then came right up to them. She wore a skirt and a tunic with a sergeant's shoulder loop insignia, and had discarded her tall boots for high-heeled slippers.

"This is my commander," she told Zavyalov. "Are you old friends too?"

"Yes, like you," Voronin said sarcastically.

"That's fine, everything's fine then," Olga said hastily and, Zavyalov thought, nervously. "And I'm serving in Lieutenant Voronin's squadron. I'm the armourer. I look after the commander's plane."

"I know," Zavyalov said.

"But, you see, Lieutenant Voronin doesn't really trust me, I'm afraid," she hurried on as if dreading the silence

that would follow if she stopped talking. "He won't take me up as his gunner."

"Well, I'll be going," Voronin said brusquely. "Good-night. On second thoughts. . . ."

He let the sentence trail, shrugged, and slowly strode away from them.

"We'll be going too," Vladimir told Olga. Without meaning to he spoke the words roughly, with a challenge.

He took her arm and they walked towards the forest.

"Olga!" Voronin called out in the darkness, and to Zavyalov the voice sounded helpless, pitiable even.

"What is it?" Olga called back, and stopped.

"You'd better . . . you'd better change back into boots," Voronin, invisible in the night, said hollowly. "The grass will be wet with dew soon. You'll catch a chill."

"But I won't be long," Olga said. "I'll just talk a little with Vladimir and then come back. Can you hear me, Comrade Lieutenant?"

There was no answer.

"Come on," Olga said softly and took Vladimir's hand.

If he could have known that this was to be their last time together, that he would never see her again!

But he wasn't to know it for a long time. Not for months and months. He would get dozens of letters from her, he'd write to her endlessly wherever he happened to be, in whatever circumstances, and then there would come silence. A long black silence. . . .

But that night he was with her, walking beside her, and she was holding on to his hand as tightly as on that other night in the crowd on the Volga embankment. He was certain that for the rest of his life now he'd be able to look at her face.

He told her of his despair when he looked for her all over the ship that terrible night, and she told him about the crowd pushing her back, crushing her, and about it taking her a whole week to get a passage to Astrakhan. She also told him that she swore, back there on the landing stage, that she'd make a place for

herself in this merciless life and would never again be a bit of flotsam tossed by the current and knocked so painfully against the banks. The day after her arrival in Astrakhan, she told him, she went to the military commissariat and asked them to let her take a course of military training. They refused her. The Kom-somol Town Committee also rejected her appeal: after all, she was under age then, she was not yet eighteen.

She was bent on getting into the Air Force in some capacity because she knew it was their only chance of ever meeting again. She spent all her waking hours at the Town Committee, waylaying the secretary in the street and again in the passage outside his office. Finally she got the date of birth altered and the coveted figure 18 entered in the "age" column on her application form.

Once this main obstacle was removed, she had little trouble getting admitted to the three-month school for junior aircraft maintenance personnel, which she left as an armourer. That was how she came to be at the front, in the attack bombers' squadron.

If they had first met in peacetime under a clear, sunny sky or in a gay, brightly lighted room, who knows, perhaps they would have passed each other by unnoticed. Even if they had felt a mutual attraction their love would have developed slowly and it would have taken them a long time to realise that it really was love. . . .

But they first met in those tragic days when war was breaking up and scattering families, driving people out of their homes and putting out the lights in the windows, when Death was taking its toll of millions of lives, when the laws of war with which the younger generation was unfamiliar stepped in and the canons of peacetime life became null and void.

And though they had spent less than two days together, they knew it was love.

They came to a small glade overgrown with tall grass and surrounded by a solid dark wall of forest.

The glade was like the bottom of a gigantic well roofed with a bluish-black canopy in which the distant stars were barely discernible.

The forest lay between them and the shell-pitted fields, it sheltered them from the planes which shrieked and wailed in their fiendish merry-go-round until one of them caught fire and hurtled down, leaving a trail of black smoke in its wake. The forest lay between them and the tiresome fascine roads, the sickly, smoking oil lamps, and the dugouts you bent double to enter. . . . There were only the trees around them, and only the stars above them.

"It's my private glade, that's what I call it: My Glade. I came upon it accidentally," Olga told him. "This airfield has been our base for six months now. I discovered the glade when Skvortsov crashed."

"Who's Skvortsov?"

"One of our pilots. I saw the Messers shoot him down. His plane caught fire. It was the first death I ever saw. The commander forbade me to cry. But I couldn't help it. And so I went away into the forest where no one could see me, and it was then that I came upon this glade. I sat here and cried. It was no business of anybody's what I was doing here. Just as it isn't what we two are doing here now."

"Oh, I believe one person at least feels that it is his business. I mean Voronin. . . ."

"Let's not talk about him," Olga said quickly.

"What does he want?"

"He's our best squadron leader, Vladimir," she said, ignoring his question. "He's the straightest, the best. . . ."

"Must I hear all this?"

"But why shouldn't you?"

"Tell me, what does he want?"

"I don't know. . . . I think he wants me to be happy. He may be in love with me. A tiny bit. Maybe not. . . . Maybe he just feels protective. They all like me. All our fliers. And Voronin, he's a real hero."

She spoke very calmly and simply, but it was something else he wanted to hear her say.



"What has he done that's so wonderful? Shot down a Messerschmidt? Just one, or two perhaps, or maybe five?" Zavyalov asked sarcastically, hating the sound of his own voice.

"He has made more than two hundred operational flights and he has brought down two Messers," she replied in the same level tone. "Many of our fliers have a bigger record than that, but then he did what none of the others have ever done. He landed on enemy territory to rescue a comrade: this pilot had baled out when his plane got hit. Voronin landed beside him, picked him up and took off. The Germans were already closing in on him, firing their submachine guns, but he managed to take off all the same."

She told the story simply, and Zavyalov felt rather small.

He walked away, sat down on the grass, then stretched out on his back and lay there, gazing up into the blue-black sky.

Her steps fell softly on the grass. He did not hear her coming. She sat down beside him, hugging her knees.

A volley of tracers streaked colourfully across the sky somewhere far away.

"How funny . . . those tracers," Olga said. "I just couldn't get used to them at first. They're so bright and pretty, like a fireworks display. . . . But they bring death. Or rather they light the way for death. They show it the way. . . ."

Her mention of death filled him with apprehension. Suddenly, he saw a perfectly clear picture of what might happen. He saw the Germans bombing this airfield, the earth heaving up, and Olga, deafened by the bursting shells, rushing about amid the pelting shower of earth and broken twigs, with death close on her heels. He saw all this so clearly that he could barely suppress a cry. He sat up with a start and hugged her.

His gesture was innocent of desire, of passion. He

simply wanted to protect her, to feel that she was alive and safe.

He held her thus for an interminable moment against his heart. He bent his head and buried his face in her hair. She turned and brought her lips close to his. It was their first kiss. And then they forgot that a war was on, that they hardly knew each other, that soon they'd have to part and there was no certainty that they'd ever meet again. Nothing mattered except that they were together again and alone, alone in the world.

It was their first night, the first night in their lives. Both were completely unsophisticated, and their hearts beat fast with excitement, shyness, and the knowledge that they were on the threshold of an utterly strange world fearfully trying to open the door.

For thousands of miles around them battles were raging, men were going into attack, the Katyushas' red tongues were spitting out flashes of fire across the sky, bombs were exploding and guns roaring; generals were poring over maps, scouts were crawling on their bellies through the enemy lines, nazi sondercommands were getting their death vans ready for the next trip, executioners were charging the ovens in Maidanek, aircraft mechanics were waking up to service planes that had combat work to do. . . .

Vladimir and Olga came down to earth when day was beginning to break; the trees around them were assuming shape and the bluish-black sky above was slowly fading to a pale grey. A chorus of birds burst into song. The booming explosions in the distance became hushed, not a tracer slashed the sky, not a plane roared anywhere near them, and only the birds they could not see in the thick branches sang their simple and eternal songs. Vladimir and Olga lay side by side, their faces raised to the paling sky.

"Olga, where will I find you? We have to part now. . . ."

"You will find me, Vladimir. If you really want to, you will."

Zavyalov stood up abruptly. Something was still flickering on the screen before him and a loud boyish voice was cheerfully singing a popular airmen's song.

He hurried down the row, jostling people's knees and mumbling apologies.

Home at last. He sat down behind his desk in the small two-room flat where he first lived with his father and mother, then with his wife, and now alone.

He took out a batch of time-yellowed papers. They were newspaper clippings, references and letters-war-time stuff. Olga's letters were not there. He had treasured them. The war had spared them. But his ex-wife had not. She had found them in his desk and burnt them as a last blow before leaving him for good. Oh well, he had to give her her due: she knew how to hurt people where it hurt them most. Olga's last letter arrived on March 12, 1944. He would always remember the date. Burning a letter would not make him forget her. He himself would have to be burnt alive first.

Olga had been promoted to air gunner when she wrote that last letter. Good for her. He remembered these lines:

"...remember, Vladimir, I told you the last time I saw you that I'd never again be a bit of flotsam tossed about by the current. Getting squeezed out by the crowd on that wharf is still a bitter and humiliating memory. I told you I swore I'd make a place for myself in this world. Well, I have. I'm an air gunner now. It's a good thing to be in wartime. ..."

Yes, it was a "good thing to be". Especially considering that the pilot sat in an armour-plated cockpit and the gunner had no such protection. ... She told him she had been on operational flights in that last letter which came on March 12, 1944. There had been no more. He waited. For a week. Two weeks. Then he asked Simonyuk, his commander, to write to Olga's unit. The answer came ten days later. Zavyalov was called to the Command Post. Simonyuk handed him the letter without looking at his face. He simply said: "Here, fellow, hold it. ..." and added, when the sheet of paper with typing

on it was already in Zavyalov's hands: "There's a war on, friend. What can one do. . ."

He had the letter before him now. His wife had not burnt it with Olga's letters. She had left it. Like a knife in his heart. Let it stick there for ever.

"In reply to your enquiry I must advise you that Senior Sergeant Olga Mironova served as air gunner in Capt. Voronin's squad. On March 14, 1944, when returning from a combat mission, the plane was hit by an enemy fighter and, as reported by the leader of the group, exploded in the air. The crew did not survive. The complement of our unit is profoundly grieved by the death of this splendid, courageous girl who sacrificed her life for our country's freedom and independence, and whom the whole regiment loved. . ."

That was all. The letter was signed by the regiment's political commissar.

Zavyalov read it over again, although he knew it by heart. He put it aside and there, before his mind's eye, rose the magazine picture once more—the snow-covered ground, the group of people standing in a semicircle in front of a long timber building, and among those people a woman who looked so much like Olga.

But if a miracle had happened and Olga was alive how could it be that she had never written him a word? After all, she might have written to his regiment. She had the number of his field post.

The first thing he had asked on return to his unit after the disastrous landing that had smashed his entire career was whether there was any mail for him.

There had been none. If Olga had survived she would have written him. From wherever she was—from heaven or from hell, but write him she would. But no, he had never heard from her again, either during the war or afterwards. She had made no attempt to find out if he were alive. It meant that she was dead. Gone from this world. And there was not even a grave.

Still, he'd go to the *Looch* office tomorrow and find out all he could. There couldn't be two identical people in the world. True, it was almost twelve years since he

had seen her, but she had not changed much judging from the photo. It *was* Olga. But if it was not a mistake, if she *was* alive, why had she never written to him or tried to find him? Not once. No, it made no sense. It was not possible. Then he must have made a mistake. The woman in the picture was not Olga. But what if. . .

No, that was out of the question. Dropping his head on his arms he made another attempt to reconstruct the sequence of events and recollect every detail. On return to his unit he had reported to Simonyuk. . .

The thing to do, he told himself, was to check everything once again from the very beginning. To have a talk with Simonyuk. To verify all the dates and all the facts. . .

It was already a quarter to two. If he started now he'd be at the flying club soon after three: half an hour to the station, forty minutes by train, and twenty from there to the club. Simonyuk was sure to be there. Zavyalov could imagine how surprised everyone would be to see him there twelve days before his leave was up. Never mind about that just now. He put his hand in the pocket where he always kept the railway time-table, bound in a little book, and his fingers touched an envelope. Yes, of course, it was the letter he got at the rest home from Victor, a third cousin of his. The boy had just graduated from the Leningrad Road-Building Institute and was asking Zavyalov to put him up for two or three weeks before he went on to where he was appointed to work.

Let him come, why not? He must remember to send him a telegram. He'd do it at the station. Now then, when was the next train?

## 5. THERE ISN'T GOING TO BE A NEXT TIME

“It’s an optical illusion, man, just an optical illusion, nothing but empty air,” Simonyuk said at last.

They were sitting on a grassy slope on the edge of the flying field. Simonyuk—a short and fat, square-looking man with a large head and a thick neck, shaved high up the nape—was not particularly impressed by Zavyalov’s story, and as he listened he kept glancing impatiently at the start.

“What’s so interesting there anyway?” Zavyalov thought irritably, intercepting Simonyuk’s glance. It was the usual procedure at the start. . . . In the middle of the square, marked off with little red flags, stood the grey checkered van—the starting command post. Several YAK-18s stood on the fuelling line, and the fuel tanker was slowly moving up to them. A group of trainees in blue flying suits stood in a semicircle before the instructor who held a map in his outstretched hands. Everything was just as usual.

Zavyalov’s appearance at the club had caused no comment except that everybody had naturally wanted to know what brought him back so soon. He had answered them lightly, with a joke, while his eyes had ranged over the airfield looking for Simonyuk. Sighting him at last at the take-off strip, Zavyalov had gone up to him and taken him away to the far end of the field where they would not be disturbed.

“Look here,” Zavyalov tried again. “Supposing we do assume, in spite of everything, that there were letters. There were letters, you understand? All right, make it

one letter. I wasn't there, I was thought dead, so who would take care of my mail? Any letters addressed to me could have easily got lost or been simply thrown away."

"We're back to where we started," Simonyuk said in his husky voice. "All letters whose addressees are dead go to the political commissar. Right? And he answers them. You know the routine as well as I do. When you returned, the political commissar was there and you asked him about it. Right?"

"Yes, but. . ."

"Then there's nothing more to be said."

The look he gave Zavyalov was indulgent but at the same time it showed how vastly superior he felt.

Simonyuk was over sixty and had retired ten years ago. They were both no longer on active service but they differed sharply in their attitudes to the fact. It was with bitter regret that Zavyalov, deprived of and debarred from the work he loved, realised that he was standing still while life went on. Simonyuk, on the other hand, cherished a conviction that history came to a stop the day he ceased to be a commander in the Air Force. Anything that people did without his participation he regarded as ill-considered and unlawful, deserving only of criticism and sarcasm, or at the very least of tacit disapproval.

When the Air Force retired him for reasons of age and also, perhaps, because he did not belong to those officers with whom the Armed Forces could not afford to part, Simonyuk went about in his uniform for a time—a right he chose to exercise.

However, he realised before long that uniform without power, without the right to command, without prospects of promotion, was in actual fact worth nothing. Having realised this he never again touched his service jacket, high boots or his colonel's tall fur hat, which in view of his small stature was the hardest thing to dispense with.

Simonyuk was paid a very good pension which he thought only right since it was his considered opinion

that the state and all the people around him were indebted to him for life in some measure or other. He came to love money, and having discovered that a little extra could be made without too much effort, he began to look about for a suitable job, deciding finally on this flying club. He was put in charge of the personnel department, which was work after his own heart and eminently preferable to any of the jobs directly connected with flights or the instruction of trainees. During the war he was regarded as not a bad commander—not that he belonged with the best. In those days Simonyuk could not have envisaged the future outside of the service. But when the war was over and he had to play second fiddle in one of the subdivisions of the Ministry of Defence, he often caught himself envying the officers who were being retired on a good pension.

But getting his retirement orders hurt his pride all the same, and so he nursed a grudge against the "new" people who had the audacity—through sheer stupidity and irresponsibility, no doubt—to dispense with his services in active, commanding posts.

He developed his urge to criticise all things modern into a need, and cultivated a peculiar outlook on life, seeing it as something that was continuing its movement forward with an idling motor.

Simonyuk had little education really, but he was quick on the uptake and was a good talker. He took pride in his life experience and his ability to size up a situation promptly. A man who's been around—that's the type of person he was.

But what he liked to consider himself was a "cultured person". He often repeated the phrase "we cultured people" and even wrote to the newspapers occasionally.

He liked to write letters in which he would level sharp criticism at different things, mainly literature. Perhaps it was his sincere opinion that everything the authors wrote was wrong, that "things like that did not happen in real life", and that writers, as a general rule, were irresponsible people with a propensity for describing for a good fee something they knew nothing about.



Even if the book was about something entirely new to Simonyuk, he still thought he knew more about the subject than the author did.

His criticism was harsh and uncompromising. He did not believe in half-measures, and invariably demanded "capital punishment" in his verdicts.

His letters had a uniform beginning: "It was with great interest that I began to read..." and as uniform an ending: "The impression left by the book in question is one of profound dismay, and the reader feels justified in asking: by what right..." He signed them with his name in full, rank and all.

He disliked active people. Especially those who "wriggled", as he called it to himself, and more especially if they were his former fellow officers, now retired. They should do as Simonyuk did and "keep nice and quiet". The only privilege he granted them was the right to take on a job as soft as his, requiring as little exertion, and to sneer at the present as venomously as they wished. Their attempts to continue living an active life he regarded as a challenge, a personal insult.

Simonyuk belonged to that breed of men to whom life is merely a synonym of their rank in the service hierarchy and the complex of connections and mutual relations with their superiors and subordinates. They are devoid of any sort of individuality, having either strangled it at birth or simply lost the habit of thinking and acting outside of their habitual environment.

In everything that Zavyalov told him now, Simonyuk detected signs of the "wriggling" he hated, a striving to act without being told to, an incomprehensible desire to worry and even to suffer.

All this went against Simonyuk's grain, which was a consideration Zavyalov failed to take into account when he sought out his former commander, believing with a blind, obscure faith that in him he would find support, if not actual help.

He still clung to this faith, he could not give up hope so soon.

"The political commissar wasn't there all the time

and you know it," he said. "He told me himself that a month or two after what happened to me he was wounded and spent some time in hospital. If a letter arrived in his absence it would. . . ."

"A month or two after what happened to you I was called to the Division SMERSH and told that according to their information you were alive," Simonyuk interrupted him. "After that, any letter addressed to you would have come to me and I would have handed it over to the SMERSH agent. That's that."

The way he said the words, they sounded like a hammer hitting a nail head. The last, final blow. Bang—and the nail was in. Right in the heart. All of it but the head.

The hard training he had imposed upon himself during those long, tormenting years to teach himself to forget and never think of the past again was brought to nil.

With his eyes he followed the plane that was gathering speed for the take-off, and suddenly he fancied that it was himself, Vladimir Zavyalov, in the cockpit up there. . . .

He had been flying over enemy territory when he sighted that goddamned Focke-Wulf and started in pursuit, which perhaps he ought not to have done: he had already brought down one Messerschmidt and had used up practically all his ammunition. Besides, his engine was not running well.

But the instinct of a cat who can't look at a mouse calmly whatever the circumstances was already strong in him. He started in pursuit of the Focke-Wulf which was quite a distance off. The familiar thrill of an imminent engagement in a dogfight was making him slightly light-headed. He gained on the enemy plane with every second. He was almost on to it when he saw the slim silhouette of a Messerschmidt suddenly flash across the sunny sky.

The Messerschmidt was obviously tacking itself on to the tail of the plane piloted by young Lyutikov who belonged to Zavyalov's squadron. It took Zavyalov no

more than a few seconds to swerve round in order to intercept the Messerschmidt and wedge himself in between the German and Lyutikov, but still he was too late. A dazzling burst of machine-gun fire pierced Lyutikov's plane and it began to drop, leaving black clouds of smoke in its trail.

It seemed to be all over for Lyutikov, but then Zavyalov saw a tiny dot detach itself from the falling plane and the canopy of a white parachute mushroom out above it.

In the stress of the moment the thought farthest from his mind was that under similar circumstances Lt. Voronin, Olga's squadron commander, had achieved a heroic rescue. It was only later, when fainting from exhaustion and hunger he lay down in a pool of warm stagnant water and then struggled up, walked and crawled, tearing his way through the thickets, that he convinced himself that he had consciously repeated Voronin's feat, of which Olga had spoken with such rapt admiration.

In those seconds he had no thought for anyone but Lyutikov, the twenty-year-old pilot who had come to join Zavyalov's squadron three months before straight from flying school. He had to be rescued at all costs. Zavyalov pulled the lever to let down the undercarriage, his hearing automatically registered the familiar click, he felt the usual jolt and saw the little green indicator lights go on.

Full realisation of what he was doing came to him only when the wheels touched the ground. Lyutikov started running to him. He was limping badly, he must have been wounded in the leg or hurt it on landing.

In the same instant Zavyalov saw a German car stop in the road, he saw German soldiers springing into view from the shrubs, he heard shots and the whistling of bullets. The Germans were almost on them. But Lyutikov had already made the plane and was already scrambling up the wing. Zavyalov began his take-off run. And suddenly he felt a terrific jolt. Apparently, there

was a hole in the ground or some anti-tank obstacles hidden from view by the tall grass.

He had a lucky break—it was like drawing the one winning ticket out of a thousand. He was thrown clear of the plane and made a dash for the forest. Behind him he heard an explosion which drowned out the sound of submachine-gun fire.

He got away. How, he did not know. Maybe the blast had stunned the Germans and killed some of them. Or maybe it was sheer luck. He ran on, scrambled up rises, tore through the tangle of trees, waded through the swamp, fell into pools of water, passed out, came to again. . . .

It was not until then that he remembered Voronin's feat. But who knows? It may be that subconsciously he did remember it when he let down the undercarriage.

But he had failed to repeat Voronin's feat, had failed to rescue his comrade. And then, as he dragged his body along through the Volkhov forest marshes, collapsing and fainting and struggling up again, he thought for the first time that it was a good thing that Olga would never know how ignominiously, how ignobly he was ending his life.

. . . When he finally crossed the front line and got back to his unit, the first thing he asked was if there were any letters for him.

There had been none. Simonyuk was right. Olga was dead, she would never know what Zavyalov had done in an effort to be worthy of her. She would never know that when the war was over they discharged him from the service, no reasons given.

No charges were presented to him. He was treated politely. He was told that he was a young man, in his prime actually, that he could easily "make a bit of money" doing some civilian job. He, a war flier, was advised to "make a bit of money"!

He knew it was senseless to argue or try to prove his innocence. He knew that all those who had been taken prisoner or had been on enemy territory for any length of time were getting their discharge from the Armed

Forces, although their good faith had been checked and double-checked since their return. Many of them were again charged with crimes of which they had already been acquitted on several previous check-ups.

He'd rather he were charged with something. He'd have a goal before him then, he'd know that he had to clear himself, to tell his story in minute detail again, to prove that he had not been in captivity, not for a single minute, and that he had kept his identification papers intact.

Obviously this was known to the men who held his future in their hands. And still, obeying some ironbound, soulless principle, they banished him from the world outside of which he could not exist.

Zavyalov could not reconcile himself to this injustice. His heart and his intelligence revolted against the incredible cruelty of the verdict. The only thing he could do was try to forget, train himself never to remember what happened to him in 1946. He had to forget.

And now Simonyuk reminded him. Casually and brutally. He simply took a nail, placed it point down against Zavyalov's heart, and hammered it home.

Zavyalov's immediate reaction was to say something very rude and insulting to Simonyuk, to tell him he was wrong, that his attitude was disgusting, shabby and vile.

But wrong in what way? Had Simonyuk told him anything but the truth? He had been summoned to SMERSH—Death to Spies, which was what the Special Department, the Military Counterintelligence had been called from 1943 or thereabouts. And it was also true that he would have had to hand over to them any letters addressed to Zavyalov. But there had been no letters to hand over. That was all. So what was there to argue about?

Such was the voice of logic. But Zavyalov heard another voice breaking in, the voice that had rebelled against this kind of logic all those years. Now it sounded louder to him than all the rest. This voice suggested that Simonyuk by his coolness, his callousness, his disdainfully ironical attitude to Zavyalov's new problem

was, as it were, countenancing the injustice done him and confirming the stability, even the immutability, of his present position.

"She is alive!" Zavyalov said loudly, with a challenge, looking straight into Simonyuk's eyes.

"An optical illusion, Comrade ex-Major," Simonyuk said with a smirk. "You're building this out of thin air, I'm telling you."

"No!" Zavyalov shouted.

"You aren't?" Simonyuk asked.

"It is Olga. I would know her anywhere!"

Evidently Zavyalov's excitement was beginning to annoy Simonyuk.

"Just what do you want me to do about it?" he asked, turning away.

"I want you to try and remember if you did or did not ever meet that political commissar? You know the one who wrote that she was dead . . . he might know more, some trifling details, bits and pieces. . ."

"Those who perish in a burning plane leave no bits and pieces."

"But it was a mistake, can't you see that it was a mistake?" Zavyalov cried. "It's her picture I saw, I know it's hers. I'm to be at the *Looch* office at eleven tomorrow morning and they'll tell me where the picture was taken, they'll give me the address and everything. . ."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm asking you what will you do then?"

"Why, isn't it obvious? I'll send her a telegram at once and take the next plane going there. I still have eleven days of my leave left. . ."

"I see. It's to be an assault. A cavalry attack," Simonyuk sneered.

"Cut out the sarcasm, Simonyuk. Surely you can understand what Olga means to me? What she meant to me then and still does? I don't really live. The way I live now is not real life. But if I find her. . ."

"What then?" Simonyuk asked with an alert look in his eyes.

"What then?" Zavyalov paused, feeling that he could not speak about it to Simonyuk.

"You don't know," Simonyuk said smugly. "All right, listen then, I'll tell you. Let's suppose she is alive and you find out her address. You go there. Right? You know the song: 'Where is the house and where is the street, where is the darling on whom I'm so sweet. . . .' Let's suppose you find the house. 'Here is the house and here is the street. . . .' And here is the very same darling on whom you're so sweet. But the darling will be well past thirty now—her kids, a bunch of them, are due back from school at any moment, and her husband who has gone to the baths, say, is also expected home soon. . . ."

"Stop it, please."

"Oh no, you asked for it, so you've got to take it," Simonyuk said in a stern commander's voice. "Well then, you barge into someone else's family. I'm so and so, you say, reporting for duty. Is the set-up clear enough?"

"It's not possible. . . ."

"It is and how! Do you imagine she's been pining for you all these years and never married? All right, we've studied the first variant. And now let's look at the second one: it's not Olga. Honestly, I'd choose the second variant. It would be easier on you. Use your imagination: if she has been alive all these twelve years and has never written you a line, what can it mean? See? If you do see, then what the bloody hell do you want to go to her for? To have it out with her or shed tears? If it's the first, then by what right? The war has written everything off. You've been breaking your heart over her, and maybe she never took the affair seriously. . . ."

"Stop it, I tell you again. . . ."

"Not yet. Neither of the variants suits you, I see. Well, I have a third. Shall we study it? What you want is to find her alive and kicking and also true to the promise she gave you all those years ago. It's amazing, but that's what you want. It's like in that joke. D'you

know it? A man whose wife has gone to a seaside resort is sitting with a friend and wondering aloud if she's two-timing him at that seaside resort place. The friend says she definitely is, but he can't say with whom: an old friend or a chance acquaintance. He takes out a coin and says: 'What's the good of guessing. Let's toss this: heads it's with an old friend, tails it's with anyone who comes along.' 'Hey, wait,' cries the husband. 'But what if she doesn't run around at all, what if she's being faithful to me?' 'Why, the coin will stay in mid-air then, that's all,' says the friend." Simonyuk gave a burst of exaggeratedly hearty laughter, and immediately turned serious again. "All right, let's see what we've got. There is a third variant. Listen. Supposing she got sent to camp. Either during the war, or after. Maybe she really did survive when the plane caught fire. I don't see how she could, but maybe she did manage to bale out or something. Supposing she landed on enemy ground, like you. What she did there is something you and I can't know. Maybe she got in with the Germans. Might be anything else too. And so after liberation they arrested her. Sure they let her out afterwards. But just think: would it be healthy for you to try and find her if that's the case? Consider yourself lucky that she's not your wife or your sister or anything."

"Simonyuk, I've had enough."

"Oh no, you've got to hear it all. I'll be through in a minute, but it's you who got me all hot and bothered with your daydreams. I understand your fairy story perfectly, if you want to know. Maybe even better than you do yourself. What you want to do is resurrect your old life. You want to stretch your past out into the present. But there's one thing you mustn't forget: what's past is past. It's not this Olga girl you want so much as getting back into the Air Force. You want the feel of the joy stick in your hand once again, that's the trouble. But there's no return for you. There's your personal record with words to that effect written across it. In red pencil."



"The people who made those inscriptions have since been put on trial," Zavyalov said quietly through clenched teeth, barely able to keep his temper under control.

"What of it?" Simonyuk grinned. "A lot you know about politics! Zavyalov, listen to me, you served in my regiment and that makes you a sort of son to me." Little soulful notes were allowed to creep into his voice. "So I'll tell you something which I'd never say to anyone else. Don't put too much faith in this warm wind. If you think you'll be able to set sail in this wind, give up the hope. Get my meaning? And why the fuss anyway? You've got a good job, you get paid for it, you're still young, you're unattached, so why can't you simply enjoy life?"

He fell silent, then raising himself up a little on his arms craned his short neck and peered at the far end of the airfield.

"Why don't the bastards bring lunch! I'm hungry enough to eat a horse. Never mind, I'll make it really good and hot for those loafers as soon as I can get my hands on them!"

So that's it, he wants his lunch. He wants his lunch! Zavyalov repeated to himself with increasing anger. He's been on the lookout for the lorry with the lunch all this time. It's his lunch hour, and so everything else can go to hell. Colonel Simonyuk wants his lunch. But why don't you speak up? Why don't you let him have it? Why did you keep quiet when he said all those insulting things? Yes, yes, he did insult you, and not only you. He has no faith in anything. Neither in you nor in your dreams. He doesn't care for anybody's dreams. He thinks he has the right to talk to you like that. You're his own kind, he thinks. Birds of a feather. He's certain that you've been knocked out for good, that you'll never get up again. He sneers at your dreams. But I'm not daydreaming, Colonel! I'm not, you hear me? No, I shan't bother to explain. You wouldn't understand anyway. You'd be afraid to understand. . . . But then why don't I say something?

He knew why, and it was a bitter realisation. He did

not say anything because this hateful, prying person had seen the fears which he kept hidden at the bottom of his heart, and allowed no one, not even himself, to see.

"It's coming!" Simonyuk shouted, jumping swiftly to his short fat legs. Considering his bulk, the performance was astonishing. "Let's talk about it next time..."

"There isn't going to be a next time," Zavyalov said loudly.

Simonyuk was starting to run to the lorry which was bringing their lunch. He paused and asked in a puzzled voice, "What's that?"

"Run, Simonyuk, hurry!" Zavyalov said, giving rein to his feelings. "Go stuff your fat belly!"

He turned and marched off in the opposite direction.

The moment he knew that his mind was made up and that he'd never come to Simonyuk for help again, his anger subsided. He just felt sad. Say what you may, but Simonyuk was also a part of his past, his hand had also touched that letter. But soon even this feeling of sadness passed. There was no longer room for Simonyuk in his thoughts.

He crossed the airfield with broad strides. The trainees waiting to go up saw him and came running to him.

The distance between him and them was getting shorter and shorter. He was on the point of warding them off with a gesture—arms raised shoulder-high, palms up—saying that he was on holiday, but instead he asked what exercise they were doing that day. They told him that they were practising blind flying.

Zavyalov wanted only to wish them luck and move on, but to his own surprise he turned to the nearest boy and asked him if he had correctly memorised the order in which the curves and tight turns had to be made if the pilot sat in a closed cockpit and if he remembered what he had to make sure of first when settling in the cockpit and closing the canopy. The boy answered smartly, in a voice slightly shaking with excitement. Zavyalov thought he'd ask the boys one more

question and go. Did they know how to divide their attention correctly when watching the instruments in a blind flight? He knew from experience how important this was for a beginner. After all, the numerous instruments on the panel were all the pilot could see if he was sitting in a cockpit with a canvas canopy.

Then he asked another question, and one more, and now he could not bring himself to go away without first watching the boys take their seats and perform the first blind flight in their lives.

## 6. THE SEARCH GOES ON

“I’ll have to disappoint you a little bit,” Korostyleva said, rather overdoing the brightness, as soon as Zavyalov entered the room. “We haven’t found the letter yet. You see, the secretary is away on leave, and the girl doing her job is not very experienced.”

Zavyalov noticed, on approaching her small desk, that she had all the photographs belonging to that series set out before her.

“I was hoping to learn something from the press photographers who supplied the material for this page,” Korostyleva continued. “There are four of them. But unfortunately two are abroad at the moment. Of the two who are in Moscow I’ve spoken to one already, but he has no idea where the photo you’re interested in came from. I’m expecting the other one any time now. I asked him to come to my office first thing. And that is all that I have to tell you.”

“But what am I to do?” Zavyalov was in despair.

“Stop worrying.”

“But I can’t wait!” he cried.

“Why not?”

“Because I . . .”

He bit back the words. It was such a simple question and yet how senseless and stupid! Knowing that Olga was alive, wouldn’t he want to send a telegram and jump into the first train or plane that would take him to her? How could he tell this woman that for him Olga was a lost star whose light was suddenly illuminating his life again?

"No need to worry," Korostyleva said, touching his hand with her long, bony fingers. "You know that she's alive. These photos are quite recent."

A silence fell between them.

"Look here," he asked then. "Might not the photo have come from one of those files, or is it quite out of the question?" With a nod he indicated the thick mock-leather files stacked on the shelves.

"Quite," Korostyleva said firmly. "Those are our annals. History. Everything has its name there.... People and events."

"Both good and bad?" Zavyalov asked with a grim smile.

"Just the way it is in life."

"Have you published all that's in the files?"

"Oh no, not all. Only about twenty-five per cent, no more."

"But who are you keeping the remaining seventy-five per cent for?"

"Oh, just in case. And for posterity too."

"What does that mean? Why don't you show your annals to us, to people living today? They ought to be published in book form."

"What for?"

"So we could recall the past, both the good and the bad, find our friends and relations, go back to the times when we were better or worse. . . ."

"But what for?"

"There you go again!" he exclaimed. "Remember in Gorky's *The Lower Depths* the Tatar shouts: 'You must play fair!' and Satin asks: 'What for?' Some things are self-evident, they don't need to be explained."

"Oh, there are so many things in our life that still need explaining!" Korostyleva said in a low voice.

Zavyalov glanced at her attentively. Grey hair. A tired look about the eyes. Lots of lines. Had she been through too much? Who hadn't in those years!

"That's what I say," he said gruffly. "A beginning has been made, I think. But it can't be done without refer-

ring to people's memory. And you've locked it away. You've packed it in mock-leather files and locked it away."

Korostyleva shook her head.

"So many files have been unlocked in this past year. You wouldn't be saying this if you knew. But I sometimes wonder if it's necessary. People's memory is kind, it gets blunted with time and then things don't hurt so terribly."

"Don't worry about people," Zavyalov broke in. "They're not suicides."

Just then the door opened and in came a young man in a silvery jacket made of nylon or perhaps parachute silk.

"Here you are at last!" Korostyleva greeted him effusively. "Meet Comrade Zavyalov."

"Filonov is the name," the young man introduced himself. He nodded to Zavyalov but did not offer to shake hands.

"It's about the April Issue, Slava," Korostyleva told him. "You took some pictures for it together with Gol-tsev, Shapiro and the rest. It was that pre-May Day series, remember?"

"Sure I remember," Filonov said with a puzzled look at Zavyalov.

"Good. Come here then," Korostyleva said. "Where was this picture taken, d'you know?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Where *was* it taken?"

"We don't know. I. Ivanov is all it says on the envelope. I was hoping you'd know."

"What has happened actually? Something top-secret got into the picture? D'you mean that long timber building in the background? And what organisation do you represent, comrade?" he asked Zavyalov.

"Oh no, Slava, no, you've got it all wrong," Korostyleva hastened to put him right. "It's a missing persons case. We're trying to find someone. A woman."

"Your wife or your daughter?" he asked Zavyalov matter-of-factly.

"My daughter," Zavyalov snapped, his annoyance undisguised.

"I don't seem to see any children here," Filonov said, taking no notice of Zavyalov's anger. "I remember I once took a picture of quads...."

"Comrade Zavyalov is trying to find a woman who died in the war," Korostyleva said, rebuking Slava with a look. "That was the information he received, but he is sure that he recognised her in this picture."

"When do you expect the other photographers back?" Zavyalov asked Korostyleva in order to put an end to the senseless conversation.

"In a matter of days."

"Can I ring you up?"

"Of course. I'll give you a ring myself. Have you a telephone at home?"

"Yes," Zavyalov said, writing his number down for her. "Only let me call you. It's pretty hard waiting, you know."

"Of course, naturally.... We'll make a print of this. I'm sure you'd like to have the picture. It'll be ready tomorrow. I'll leave it with the secretary for you."

"Thanks."

That was all. He could go now. He gave Korostyleva a hearty handshake and nodded slightly to Filonov as he walked out past him. His sort couldn't be expected to remember anything. All they had on their minds was nylon jackets with zippers here, there and everywhere. A fashion plate. What did pain and suffering mean to a hare-brained kid like that? What's the current word for them? Oh yes, teddy boys.

Very, very slowly he walked down the stairs.

When he rang the *Looch* office three days later he was told that the photographers were still away. Two days after that Korostyleva herself rang him. They were back, she told him. But they didn't know anything about the picture. She would try to establish I. Ivanov's identity.

But this would naturally take time. In the meantime. . . . Hadn't Zavyalov better apply to the Missing Persons Department? It was the thing to do in such cases. He knew the woman's full name and her date of birth too, most probably. She really advised him to try. She hoped. . . . She wished him luck. . . . The conversation was over.

It was exactly a week since his return to Moscow. What had he found out in the time? What did he have? Only this snapshot. True, it was a good picture. Post-card size. It was there on the desk before him. The old man with the fur collar, the woman in the fancy hat, and Olga between them. If only he could ask the woman in the hat to move her head a little.

He covered the figures on either side of Olga with his thumbs. Now there was only Olga. Quite close, right here. "Simonyuk doesn't believe that I'll find you. He thinks I shouldn't try to find you at all. He doesn't believe in the warm wind. But I do."

He stood up and slapped the picture down on the desk, face down. Enough. He didn't want this dead likeness. He had to find the real, living Olga. To hell with all those photographers who couldn't even remember what pictures they had taken.

Korostyleva would go on with the search. She was a fine person. She sincerely wanted to help him. Her suggestions would be sound. He would go to the Missing Persons Department. . . .

Zavyalov sat on a long wooden bench in a poorly lit corridor, waiting his turn. He had been waiting a long time for this solid brown door with the name K. M. Prokhorova on a little black plate to open.

At last he was called in. A small room. A small office desk. At the desk, a woman wearing the uniform of a militia lieutenant. She, evidently, was K. M. Prokhorova.

"Sit down," she said quietly.



She looked about fifty. She had a rather lean face with high cheekbones and sharp, cold eyes. Her hair was gathered up in a bun.

Zavyalov sat down.

"Well?" Prokhorova said.

"I want to find someone I thought was dead," Zavyalov began. The setting depressed him and he tried to adopt an official tone to match it. "The name is Olga Alexeyevna Mironova. I received the news of her death in 1944. Now I've seen her photograph in a magazine. I haven't managed to find out where and exactly when the photograph was taken. I'd like to. . . ."

"The documents," Prokhorova said, cutting him short.

He took out his passport and laid it on the desk. Prokhorova did not touch it.

"I mean the documents that prove your relationship to this citizen. What is your connection with her? Is she your wife, your daughter, your sister?"

"She's a friend," Zavyalov said after a pause.

"We don't search for friends, Citizen. This department undertakes to search only for direct relatives." Prokhorova pushed Zavyalov's passport back to him and looked impatiently towards the door.

"But . . . but she's my wife in common law," Zavyalov said hurriedly. "It was only because of the war that we couldn't get properly married. We met in 1941. . . ."

"The law about recognising only properly registered marriages came into force in 1944. You've had time enough to go through the formalities."

"Yes, but. . . ."

He couldn't find another word to say. He simply glared at this raw-boned woman with hatred. Even if he'd known she had the power to find Olga he couldn't have forced himself to speak at that moment. When Prokhorova spoke again her voice seemed to reach him from another room.

"We can't waste time and resources in searching for mere friends."

Zavyalov picked up his passport and put it in his pocket. He rose abruptly and walked to the door. Suddenly he heard the woman's high, rasping voice say:

"You think I'm wrong, don't you?"

Zavyalov turned. He noticed the patches of colour that had appeared on the woman's haggard cheeks. Was she annoyed? Or ashamed of herself?

"To this day there are thousands of people who can't find their children or their parents," Prokhorova resumed. "And here you are suddenly remembering some friend of yours after twelve years. And you think it's fair to insist that we should start searching for her, taking dozens of people away from their jobs and squandering our very limited resources. And all because you imagine you've recognised a woman who was a friend, just a friend of yours, twelve years ago. But you think I'm wrong, don't you?"

"I haven't asked myself whether you're wrong or not," Zavyalov said slowly. "I'm not interested in that. But I want to say this—when one of two people who are in love with each other is in a plane and that plane is hit by a shell or a machine-gun bullet and catches fire in the air. . . . I want to say that's a good enough reason for not going through the marriage formalities in time. Good morning."

"Stop."

Zavyalov had almost reached the door.

"Come back and sit down," said Prokhorova. Her tone was authoritative. He walked back and sat down.

"Tell me the whole story, from the very beginning," said Prokhorova. She reached for a clean sheet of paper and picked up a sharp-pointed blue pencil. "So the name is Olga Alexeyevna Mironova. She was in the army, you say. Tell me her rank, age, the front she was on, the number of her unit."

He told her everything from the very beginning. He found it very hard to speak but somehow he managed

to reply tersely to her interrogation. Question-answer, question-answer.

That was all Prokhorova wanted to know. She wasn't interested in feelings. Only in facts. And dates.

At last she laid down her pencil and said:

"One more question. You don't have to answer it if you don't want to. If Mironova is alive, as you think, then her plane didn't crash. Or she must have survived by a miracle. Isn't that so?"

"Evidently," Zavyalov said.

"Then why didn't she write to you? You'd been writing to each other regularly up to that time."

Again that wretched question!

"I was absent from my unit for a long time," said Zavyalov, lowering his eyes.

"But your unit knew where you were? Her letters could have been forwarded."

"You couldn't forward letters to the place I was at," Zavyalov said.

She misunderstood him.

"But people eventually return from secret missions whatever they are. You returned, for one. But you didn't hear from her? Am I right?"

"You're right."

"Didn't it occur to you that this was a complicating factor? It doesn't square very well with your theory that Mironova is alive. Or..."

"I was on occupied territory," Zavyalov said brusquely, looking Prokhorova straight in the eyes. "My comrades gave me up for dead."

Prokhorova's expression was imperturbable. It held neither surprise, sympathy, nor condemnation.

"Your comrades did, perhaps," she said calmly. "But Mironova couldn't have known, could she? D'you rule out the possibility that one of your friends might have written and told her you were dead?"

"I do rule it out," Zavyalov said after a little thought. "I was the only one who knew her field post number. Besides, I baled out behind the German lines only a

month after she'd been listed as killed. I usually heard from her at least twice a month."

"You see," said Prokhorova, "all the facts indicate that you're mistaken and that this person ... this Olga Alexeyevna Mironova was killed."

"No."

Prokhorova stared at him hard and after a short silence said:

"Very well. Make your application. Here's a form. Write: 'To the Missing Persons Department. Please institute a search for Citizen Mironova, Olga Alexeyevna.'"

He walked along the street repeating to himself: "Please institute a search for Citizen Mironova, Olga Alexeyevna. ... Please institute a search. ..."

The phrase hypnotised him. Such an absurd phrase: "Please institute a search for Citizen. ..." The whole business was so horrible—that cold, featureless office, that talk like an interrogation, Prokhorova's flat, fish-like eyes. "Please institute a search for Citizen. ..."

But he had no choice. This was his last hope. He would have to go back to that office. Prokhorova had given him no assurance that he could count on any results for two or three weeks. "Naturally, you can call earlier if you have time. ..." she'd said.

If he had time! He had the time to run, to fly, to walk, to crawl—if only he knew it would bring him nearer to Olga.

He walked as far as the square in front of the Byeloruskaya Station. He went down into the Metro and rode to Sverdlov Square. He changed to the Revolution Square Station and took a train going in the direction of Arbat Square.

It was raining hard when he emerged into the street again. People were bunched in gateways and house entrances. The pavements were deserted. Only around the newspaper stand did the people brave the rain. That day the papers contained the decision of the Central

Committee of the Communist Party about eliminating the consequences of the personality cult.

Zavyalov was almost alone on the pavement. People standing in the doorways or hugging the walls looked curiously at the man walking slowly in the rain.

He was so wrapped up in his gloomy thoughts that he did not notice the way people looked at him. He was almost home now.

"Greetings to the older generation!" someone called to him in a loud, ringing voice, startling him.

It was Victor, Zavyalov's cousin, who had arrived from Leningrad and had been waiting for him for two hours on the doorstep.

## 7. HOW MANY TRUTHS IN THE WORLD?

"What a very romantic story," said Victor pensively, his eyes sparkling with interest. "D'you think she's alive?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Very curious! Supposing you find her, what will you do then? Will you marry her?"

"I . . . I don't know. It would depend on her, mainly."

"Very curious," said Victor again and glanced at the photograph on the desk. "It that her?"

"Yes," Zavyalov said.

Victor was Zavyalov's only surviving relative. A few years after the end of the war Zavyalov had unexpectedly received a letter from him. Victor, then a first-year student at the Leningrad Road-Building Institute, wrote that his father had just died, leaving him alone in the world. Zavyalov replied immediately. He would always be happy to see him, though they had never met. He sent the boy a little money. Since that time he had been giving him a small but regular allowance.

In 1952, during his summer holidays, Victor visited him for the first time. He turned out to be a lean young man of average height dressed in a shabby ski jacket and an old pair of trousers. Zavyalov took to him at once. He had a sharp tongue, he was a little over-confident, but at the same time he possessed a likeable boyish naïveté. That summer he spent almost two months with Zavyalov.

Victor stayed with him for a few days again in 1954 when passing through Moscow on his way to take a practical course.

Two years had passed. And now Victor, a graduate engineer, was again sitting in Zavyalov's room. This time he was wearing a decent sports suit. Sprawling in a chair with his legs stretched out before him, he listened to Zavyalov's tale.

Victor had been there for a week now. Zavyalov was becoming attached to the boy. Still, he had never told him about Olga. In the evenings, they talked of various things but mainly the subject that everyone was thinking about during the spring and summer of 1956, also about Victor's future job (he'd been given one in Siberia) and the forthcoming 1957 Youth Festival in Moscow.

That day Zavyalov had telephoned Prokhorova—he could not stand the waiting any longer. She had answered tersely—no news yet, nor was it likely that the matter would be cleared up in the near future.

He felt depressed.

When he returned home in the evening he found Victor in, twirling the knobs of the radio. He suddenly felt he couldn't keep his troubles to himself any longer and immediately began to tell him about Olga.

"She's beautiful," Victor said, picking up Olga's photograph and examining it closely. "How old would she be now?"

"She was seventeen in forty-one. She must be thirty-two now."

Victor carefully returned the photograph to its place.

"Very curious," he said. "Not a story you'd believe if you read it in the papers."

"Why not?"

"Too romantic."

"But you read far more romantic stories than that."

"Yes, rather!" Victor said. He switched on the radio again and turned the tuning knob slowly.

They heard snatches of speech, a choir singing, and then the announcer saying: "This is the Voice of America." Victor switched off at once.

"You know," he said. "At the hostel one day we were listening to the radio, and we picked up one of those

stations. There were three of us there, and we all pretended we didn't know it was *that* station. It was a long time ago, almost three years. Soon after Stalin's death. The announcer spoke of arrests and concentration camps, without mentioning the country where all this was taking place. But we all guessed that he meant us, and we only pretended we didn't understand what it was all about. Then the announcer mentioned Stalin for the first time, and the chap who sat nearest to the receiver switched it off in a hurry and said in a very loud voice: the bastards! And we two repeated after him: the bastards! We left the room quickly. And now it turns out to be true. . . ."

"What is true?" Zavyalov asked, his attention roused.  
• "All of it. The arrests and everything. But the broadcasts were jammed. What for? Can't we be trusted to distinguish between what's true and what's a lie?"

Zavyalov looked him full in the face. Victor did not drop his eyes. "Answer me, will you?" Zavyalov read in these wide-open, boyishly challenging eyes.

"When a friend or a person I trust criticises something in our life, I listen to him and often agree with him," Zavyalov said slowly. "And I, too, criticise things. But when I hear criticism from an enemy I want to push his teeth down his throat."

"But why? Does the truth become a lie if it's the enemy who says it?"

"Your approach is much too formal, Victor. Of course the enemy can also speak of our mistakes and crimes. It would be plain foolishness not to use those facts against us. But there's more to it than mere facts."

"What?"

"I can't discuss these things from positions of simple arithmetic, dammit!" Zavyalov said hotly. "You sound as cool as if it didn't trouble your heart or mind at all. The truth is always the truth to me too, but from the lips of an enemy it never comes straight. It always has dozens of lies mixed up with it."

"Discard them."



"Arithmetic again! Try to see it this way: suppose you're working very hard on something, it's a long, strenuous job but you're convinced that the thing you're doing is very important and much needed. You work long hours and often can't even spare the time for meals. And someone sitting at your elbow keeps telling you: 'You're tired.' You know you are. 'You're hungry.' You know that too. 'You didn't always till the plot of land you ought to have tilled, you didn't always get the crop yield you expected.' That's also true. 'Then why don't you drop your senseless strivings, throw away your shovel and give up the job? It is all useless, everything is a lie, your efforts and your hopes. . . .' This is what the enemy tells you."

"But what if. . ." Victor began to say when the front door bell rang. "I'll go." He went into the hall.

"Is Comrade Zavyalov in?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

Zavyalov went into the hall. He saw a stranger at the door, a man wearing a gabardine coat, a cap and high boots.

"Are you Comrade Zavyalov? Vladimir Andreyevich? I'd like to have a word with you. My name is Antonov." He dug his hand into an inside pocket and drew out a little red card which he showed to Zavyalov. "I'm from the C.I.D."

"From where?" Zavyalov asked incredulously.

"The militia," Antonov said, still holding out the card.

Zavyalov took it mechanically and returned it without examining it.

"Come in," he said.

"Shall I leave you?" Victor asked.

"Yes, go for a walk."

"Let him stay," Antonov broke in. "Are you Victor?"

They went into the room and stopped in the middle. At least the fellow might remove his cap, Zavyalov thought irritably.

"Won't you take your coat off?" he said drily.

"No, thanks," Antonov replied. However, he removed his cap. "I won't keep you long."

They sat down—Antonov at the table, Victor near the wireless.

"What's the matter?" Zavyalov asked.

"There's something I want to ask you," Antonov began. He spoke with a slight Volga accent, rather slowly.

"Go ahead."

"No, it's not you I have to ask. It's this young man here. You *are* Victor, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Victor remained outwardly calm but there was an unusual brightness in his eyes.

"Do you know Vasily Goryaev?" Antonov asked him.

For a second Victor did not reply.

"Yes, I know him," he said.

"Known him long?"

"I met him first the last time I came to Moscow. We went to a football match together."

"When was that?"

"In fifty-four."

"Have you seen him this time?"

There was a brief silence.

"Yes."

"What's all this about?" Zavyalov interrupted. "Who is this Vasily Goryaev, Victor?"

"One minute," Antonov raised a finger and turned back to Victor. "Where did you meet him?"

"In the street. He lives quite near here, in Kislovsky Street."

"Lived, let's say. And then?"

"What d'you mean 'and then'?" Victor asked. He sat bolt upright, his hands clasping the arms of the chair.

"Has he been coming to see you? I mean, has he been in this flat?"

"Well, he was here for five minutes once. Ten, perhaps."

"D'you know who he is and where he comes from?"

"Where he comes from, what d'you mean by that?"

"Well, did he tell you anything about himself and his past?"

"He didn't tell me anything. He asked me how I was getting along, whether I'd taken my finals, what I intended to do next. We talked for a bit and then he left."

"Listen," Zavyalov broke in firmly. "What is this all about? This young man is a relative of mine, a graduate of a Leningrad institute. . . ."

"The Road-Building Institute," Antonov said.

"Yes, yes, the Road-Building Institute," said Zavyalov testily. "And I think it's high time. . . ."

"One minute," Antonov interrupted him coolly, raising a finger again. "So Goryaev told you nothing particularly interesting? Nothing, eh, Victor?"

"Nothing."

"Is your memory good?"

"Excellent."

"Well, all right. . . ." Antonov shook his head slowly and then turned to Zavyalov. "This fellow Goryaev escaped from custody. He was one of a gang that robbed a street kiosk. After his conviction he got away."

"Are you trying to tell me that Victor had something to do with it?"

"Oh, no! Not at all! It's just that he was seen with Goryaev. In the street. And another time, leaving this house."

Victor had not stirred. His cheeks were aflame. But he did not avert his eyes and his look was candid, even defiant.

"Did he say anything to you about having escaped from prison?" Zavyalov asked him.

"Of course he didn't."

"I hope you understand," Zavyalov said to Antonov, "that Victor couldn't have had anything to do with the goings-on of this bandit. He hasn't been in Moscow for two years and. . . ."

"I realise that," Antonov said readily. "All we want to clear up is whether Victor knew what sort of bird Goryaev is. You didn't know, did you, Victor?"

"No, I didn't."

Antonov rose to his feet and carefully put on his cap.

"Sorry I had to bother you," he said and walked to the door. Then, just before leaving, he said abruptly: "So you're going to build roads in Siberia?"

Victor did not reply.

"Well," Antonov said good-naturedly, "road building's a good thing. We need roads. . . ."

He went into the hall. Zavyalov followed him out to open the front door. He felt a sudden impulse to draw Antonov back and ask him whether he believed that Victor had told the truth or not. But he held his tongue. If he asked it would mean that he himself didn't quite trust Victor.

He opened the door. Antonov touched his cap but didn't speak.

"Good night," Zavyalov said in a loud voice, closed the door and returned to the living room.

Victor was at the window looking down into the street. He did not turn when Zavyalov came in.

"What sort of a fellow is he, this Goryaev?" Zavyalov asked. "And why d'you bring shady characters like that into my flat without my permission?"

He realised his mistake too late. "Without my permission", what a stupid thing to say! As if he wanted to rub it in that Victor was nobody to him and had no right to feel at home in his place.

But Victor seemed not to have heard him. He went on staring out of the window. He hadn't turned even at the sound of his voice.

"Did you hear me, Victor?" Zavyalov persisted.

"I was watching him leave. He has gone down the street," said Victor at length, turning from the window.

"What does that matter? You'd better answer me. Who is this Goryaev?"

"Oh, he's just a chap," Victor said reluctantly.

"Just a chap!" Zavyalov said with irritation. "A fine chap he must be—shop-breaking!"

"He didn't do it. The others got him mixed up in the affair. His friends."

"He didn't do it, you say? How do you know that? So he *did* tell you about that business?"

Victor hesitated.

"Well, he told me he'd been in trouble and that he'd been under suspicion, but that everything was cleared up."

"Everything was cleared up, eh?"

"Yes," Victor replied shortly. He resumed his seat and switched on the radio to make it clear that the subject was closed as far as he was concerned.

The announcer said something. A symphony concert was on. Now there was a snatch of jazz, loud and clear.

"What type of jazz d'you prefer, Vladimir Andreyevich?" Victor asked suddenly. "Modern or traditional?"

"The kind you can dance to," Zavyalov said mechanically.

"D'you like dancing?"

"I used to. . . . Listen, Victor, have you told the whole story? You're not keeping anything back?"

"No, I'm not keeping anything back," Victor replied tersely with a slight frown. The subject was clearly not to his liking.

"Very well," Zavyalov said. "I believe you."

For some minutes they listened to the music in silence.

"Let me know when you find your girl," Victor said. "I'll come and see you. Oh, I shan't stay, I'll just take a look at you and go away."

"What d'you mean: take a look at us?"

"Well, perhaps I should have put it differently. I never imagined there could be that kind of love in our day and age."

"Tell me, Victor, have you got a girl friend?" Zavyalov asked on an impulse. "In Leningrad, I mean."

Victor shrugged his shoulders, paused and said: "I had a girl. I don't any more."

"Did you quarrel?"

"We didn't get on."

"Anything serious?"

"Oh no, just the usual story. The kind you read about in the papers. You know, the boy has the soul of a nomad and feels the call of the great open spaces, while the girl is just the opposite—all for kids and prams. In

a word, she pictured our future life together differently from what I did. So we parted. She wanted one thing, I wanted something else."

"And what do you want?"

"In general?"

"All right, in general."

"I want to travel. All over the world. Right round the globe. I want to see everything."

"D'you speak any foreign languages?"

"No, not really. I learned French. As far as that was possible during the cult."

"What?"

"Oh, I was joking. But you know how they used to teach foreign languages. So many hours' study, so many words to be translated with the help of a dictionary. And that was all. We never learned to speak them. Anyway, what would have been the use? We couldn't go anywhere, and any foreigners who came here were best avoided. There was no point in learning to read either, for that matter. You couldn't get hold of modern literature in the original, and all the classics are translated into Russian anyway. That's what I meant when I spoke of the cult. We can't speak foreign languages, can't understand them either. As for reading, it's just so many words in so many hours—with a dictionary. No practical use at all. Art for art's sake, so to say. Anyway, what is there to read? Why, they've only just put *Humanité* on sale here. Balzac I'd rather read in Russian. And then what use will Balzac be to me in Siberia?"

Zavyalov felt like retorting that Balzac was useful anywhere but held his tongue. He had been watching Victor attentively while he spoke. What sort of a fellow was he, after all? Was he as sincere as he seemed?

"Yes, I'd like to travel," Victor went on. "If a magician were to appear with a magic wand and say: 'I'll give you three wishes before I count three.' All three times I'd say I want to travel. There's nothing else I want. What about you, Vladimir Andreyevich? What wish would you make? Oh, I know the first: to find

Olga. I know what your second wish would be too: to fly. But your third, what would that be? Come on, tell me."

"To know whether you told Antonov the truth."

Victor said nothing.

"Please turn off the radio," Zavyalov said.

Victor obediently turned the knob. With a click, the magic eye in the plastic front of the set went out and there was silence.

"Well, the magician has said three. . . ."

"What are you getting at, Vladimir Andreyevich?"

Zavyalov stood up, went to Victor's chair, sat on the arm and put his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I want the truth," he said firmly.

"And what makes you think I lied?" Victor asked without looking up.

"I don't know. It's just a hunch. If you tell me once more that you spoke the truth I'll not ask you again. I've no reason not to believe you. Did you or did you not tell Antonov the truth?"

"I did not."

"That's what I thought," Zavyalov said almost with a sense of relief. He stood up and took a few paces across the room. Then he stopped in front of Victor. "Why didn't you?"

"It's a silly story. I first met Goryaev two years ago when I was spending the summer here with you. He'd just left school. Well, I ran into him again today. By chance. . . ."

"Go on."

"A stupid business, really. He got mixed up with some shady characters. I don't know if he was one of those who actually broke into the kiosk or if they used him as a lookout. Then they coshed someone. . . . He was pinched but he managed to skedaddle. It wasn't long ago. Now he's on the run. He can't find a place to stay. He looked quite worn out. His eyes were bloodshot. He hadn't slept for two nights, he said. Leading a dog's life, in short. He was glad to see me, I can say—an old friend. Well, I knew you were coming

home late, you'd be at the flying club, so I asked him in. He slept here—in this chair—for about forty minutes. Now you know the whole story. Any more questions?" Victor raised his head, looked at Zavyalov and smiled.

"So you knew the fellow had escaped from justice and that he was on the run," Zavyalov said, still rather dazed. "And what did you do?"

"What d'you think I should have done?" asked Victor, his thick eyebrows rising in faint incredulity.

"What do *you* think? A thief, a shop-breaker who ran away from justice! You knew that and yet..."

"You think I should have squealed?" Victor asked sharply.

"Hold on a minute," said Zavyalov. "What are you saying? I hate informers. But to tell the militia you've seen a criminal who has escaped from prison isn't the same as squealing."

"In the first place, I don't know to what extent Vasily is a criminal. I haven't gone into his case. He swears that he simply got mixed up in the business. But that isn't the point. I really can't understand you just now, Vladimir Andreyevich. What would you have me do? A man puts his trust in me and I go and lock him behind bars! Would that be honest? Is that your idea of honesty?"

"You're talking sheer nonsense," said Zavyalov angrily. "There's a difference..."

"There isn't," Victor snapped. "That's splitting hairs. Honesty is honesty, under all circumstances. And once you accept several forms of honesty you get involved in all kinds of underhand stuff. That leads to informing and the rest of it. Vasily's way of living is rotten, in my opinion. He's a fool. It's not for his sake that I won't go to the militia. It's for my own. Informing is dishonest always. What if in 1937 a friend of yours, having escaped from prison, had come to you? Would you have turned him in? They would have shot him, and now they'd have cleared him posthumously. You'd



know that you had helped in his criminal arrest. How would you feel about it now? And yet you want me to rush off to the militia. . . ."

"What I want you to do, Victor, you'll understand in a minute," said Zavyalov. "But let's talk about the example you chose first. You said 1937. I don't consider myself responsible for what happened in 1937. Not because I was only fifteen at the time. Millions of my older comrades didn't put innocent people in prison in thirty-seven or later. They were building up the country's might and are no more guilty of those crimes than I am. You gave me an example. You invented a situation. A terrible one indeed. But I won't dodge the issue. I'll tell you what I'd have done in a case like that.

"In thirty-seven, I wouldn't have concealed that man. Oh yes, today I'd feel bad about it, I'd be ashamed of what I'd done. But in thirty-seven I wouldn't have concealed him. Why not? Because I believed in Stalin. I believed what he told us thousands of times—that within our country the class struggle was growing increasingly sharp. The thought that any innocent man could be arrested and sentenced would never have occurred to me.

"We rank-and-file people found it difficult in those days to sort things out, to know what was injustice and what was a just struggle against spies and subversive elements. What made it so difficult wasn't just Stalin's great authority screening the acts of injustice, but also that injustice wasn't all that was done in thirty-seven, and afterwards too. Great and splendid things were done besides. People were giving all their youth, strength, their very lives to accomplish those things.

"Now, perhaps, you understand why in thirty-seven I wouldn't have shielded that man. I couldn't have imagined in those days that the sword of proletarian dictatorship could punish the innocent. I didn't know, I didn't admit the thought, that this sword could be aimed at one's own people. If I believed in the innocence of that man I'd have probably found the courage to state in

writing that in my experience I'd only known good of him. But I could not have kept a runaway in hiding.

"No, I couldn't have done that," Zavyalov went on. "And for another reason too. I'd have been haunted by the thought that the man had perhaps committed some serious crime, that while he was at large he was a danger to everything that was dear to me, everything I lived for. I couldn't have saved him at the expense of other people, of ordinary Soviet people like myself. What with everything I've told you, the situation you invented would have been a tragic one for me. It's a situation created by the cult of personality and everything connected with it. But now you answer this question, Victor. What can there be in common between the situation in thirty-seven and today? Nineteen thirty-seven and nineteen fifty-six are as different as night and day. What circumstances are forcing you to shield Goryaev from justice? You know that Goryaev will try and find his gang. Decent, honest people hate thieves—they won't shield him. At this very moment he and his friends are probably discussing a difficult problem of ethics—which street stall to burgle next, or they might break into a shop this time, since your Goryaev has got some experience now, or someone's flat, or they might stick up some passer-by in the street. Perhaps this very moment, Victor, their victim is walking along the street, an unsuspecting working man who has just drawn his pay and is hurrying home to his wife and children, and Goryaev and his crowd are already waiting round a corner or in the entrance of his house. And you sit here philosophising about it all!"

"That's all I want to say about the example you chose, Victor," Zavyalov resumed after a while. "Now it's your turn. Tell me, what is there in common between the situation you invented and this Goryaev? What is there in common between a situation arising out of the circumstances of 1937 and 1956? Honest people don't get arrested, it's only those who molest decent people that do. What analogy can there be between the two

situations? No, your argument will not hold water. Let me give you another example.

"Supposing you met someone who showed signs of straying off the straight and narrow path but whose loyalty as a Soviet citizen you did not doubt. I don't mean a spy or an enemy agent, not a bandit or a thief, of course—they have to be reported immediately—but simply a fellow who's a bit confused. If in a case like that you were to ask me whether you ought to rush off to the militia and report him I'd say you were a coward and a timeserver. That you are not thinking of that fellow but only of yourself. That's what I'd say to you."

"Really?" Victor drawled ironically. "Would you take it so calmly that a person like that was going about freely in our Soviet land?"

"No, I wouldn't. I'd say to you: 'Argue with him, Victor. Try persuasion. Never mind if it means spending hours on him, a night, two nights if necessary. Fight him in the open, stand up for the truth, don't back out.' That's what I'd say to you. But now let's go back to this business of Goryaev. Who is he, judging by all the facts? A thief. He robbed a street kiosk. He's one of those who spoil life for others. Who are you shielding him from? The militia? No, you're shielding him from the public. You're clearing the way for him to the next crime."

"But perhaps he's innocent," Victor interrupted. "Perhaps he just got entangled in the affair."

"Innocent! Then I'll tell you what I want you to do. If you know this fellow well enough to be convinced of his innocence, then go and defend him. But do it openly. Go to the C.I.D., go to the investigator and tell him everything you know. Try to prove his innocence, argue, defend the lad if you have grounds to do so."

"As if they'd listen to me!" Victor said sulkily. "And if it comes to that, why the hell should I get involved in it anyway?"

"Oh, you don't want to stick your own neck out? You want to be well out of it, eh? To protect your own skin. And you dare to talk to me about 1937."

"But I never meant to hurt your feelings! And I'm not trying to protect myself, though there's nothing wrong with self-preservation—a man has to live, after all. It's just that I want to act honestly. That's all I want. But does that mean you have to act the hero and go to those places, to argue and prove things?"

"You say you want to be honest, but besides wanting that you've got to have some views on life, some principles to defend. Have you any?"

"Sure. Honesty. That's my principle. All the rest are fetters."

"But who is to be the judge? Who decides what is honest?"

"Man himself. Every time. According to his integrity. By his conscience. Good is good and bad is bad. I don't want my mind all clogged up with phoney arguments and compromises. They say that when they're training a pilot or testing his fitness they put him in a cage and start spinning it in several directions at once. Up, down, diagonally, straight, sideways. . . . And when the man comes out of the cage it takes him some minutes to find his bearings, to know what's up and what's down, where's the right and where's the left, where's the way out and where's a blank wall. Or take a centrifuge. . . . That was what it was like for us. With all those formulas, facts, quotations, statistics, and analogies drummed into your head all the time you couldn't tell good from bad, and right from wrong. When you're in a state like that you may do something rotten."

Zavyalov said nothing. When he started this conversation all he wanted was to make Victor tell him the truth in a plain yes or no. He had no idea that in shielding a scoundrel Victor was acting according to his own strange and tangled philosophy which he defended with such passion. He now saw Victor in an entirely new light. He had not thought him the sort given to abstract philosophical thinking. True, two years had passed since he'd last seen him.

"I don't understand you," said Zavyalov. "Take your example of the pilot. Only a novice comes out of a spell

of training in the centrifuge in the state of confusion you've described, a man not yet fit to fly. If an experienced airman emerged in such a state he wouldn't be worth a straw. But that's not the point. You speak about honesty and conscience. But where is your compass?"

"Here," Victor said, pointing to his chest.

"Let's assume so. But in the open seas even the most experienced sailor can't rely on. . . ."

"Oh, stop it," Victor interrupted him. "That's the centrifuge again. I don't like comparisons. You can prove anything you like with them."

"But damn it all," Zavyalov said, flaring up suddenly. "You're not a Robinson Crusoe on a desert island. You're not the first man to live in this world, nor the last. There are such things as human experience and laws of social development. . . ."

"Laws?" Victor said with a wry smile. "I recognise only one law: Man is the measure of all things. Or, rather, man's conscience, his honesty."

"Listen to me," Zavyalov said, "here you are talking about conscience and honesty. But let's take a classic example. There's a civil war in progress. There are two brothers. One is a White, the other is a Red. Which of the two is a man of honour? Who is right?"

"Each one can be right in his own way."

"And what about Petlyura's supporters, and Makhno's, and the interventionists, and so on? Were all of them right 'in their own way'? But then how many truths are there in the world?"

"The centrifuge again."

"Why d'you talk like that, Victor? Every individual's truth must agree with some big, single truth. It's quite impossible for a person to stay within the confines of his own exclusive truth which he treats as his private, natural property. Is the worker who takes possession of a factory belonging to a capitalist right?"

"Oh, for God's sake!"

"Right or wrong?"

"Right."

"Excellent. But from the point of view of the capitalist he's a robber. You see, even such a classical truth as the commandment 'Thou shalt not steal' turns out to be debatable."

"But the worker who takes over a factory from the capitalist doesn't consider he has an act of robbery on his conscience," Victor demurred. "He, so to speak, is establishing social justice."

"The capitalist, however, considers it just the opposite. From his point of view it is the worker who is violating justice. Surely you must understand that there can't be the same conscience, the same measure for those who create things and those who appropriate them. There is only one way to settle the argument of who is right. It's to recognise the big, single truth—that those who create have right on their side. Then everything becomes clear. The worker is right, the capitalist is wrong."

Victor stood up.

"I don't want to listen to all that stuff," he said firmly. "If you go on much longer you'll start proving to me that everything that has now been brought to light makes nothing any different and that Pavlik Morozov remains a model of valour. I can't stand that Pavlik, if you want to know."

"Pavlik Morozov," Zavyalov said, "disclosed a plot. His father concealed criminals, kulaks."

"But those Pavliks grew up into a whole system of informers. They were the backbone of the entire period of the personality cult."

"That's not true!" Zavyalov exclaimed. "A system of informers cannot possibly grow out of people's realisation that there's nothing so sacred as the security of the Revolution. On the contrary. It grows when people forget the interests of the Revolution, when people run to the Cheka not because they've learned about some threat to their country, to its best citizens, to the common cause, but because they're afraid for their own skins, just so *they* wouldn't be suspected of shielding anyone, holding their tongues, not speaking up in time!

It's this foul acquisitiveness and fear for their own hides that make people turn informers. But Pavlik Morozov wasn't thinking of reward. He wasn't thinking of himself. And it's not the Pavlik Morozovs who are to blame for what happened later, but those who made perfectly innocent people live in fear of their lives and security, those who encouraged moral greed.

"Pavlik Morozov!" Zavyalov went on with feeling. "Of course it's a terrible thing for a son to denounce his father. But you can't apply the criterion of abstract morality in his case. D'you know who he was? A simple peasant lad. Words like 'collectivisation', 'kulak', 'socialist reconstruction of the village' weren't abstract terms to him. From his childhood he knew how hard and cheerless was the peasant's lot and he wanted it to change. He knew too that the change couldn't come about without a fight. Those were difficult times. That's the truth, Victor. What does the word *selkor*\* mean to you? In those days the kulaks used to kill, burn and flay alive those *selkors*. D'you know what a kulak is? For you it's a historical term, a remote and uninteresting figure. But if you'd tried to take his land from him, his barns or his cattle, a kulak would have trampled you underfoot, he'd have pulled your guts out alive. Pavlik saw all that with his own eyes. He knew that people wanted to build a new, sensible, beautiful and good life. And the kulaks were threatening that life and those people. He also knew his father was one of them. What was he to do? Keep silent? But that would have meant betraying the people, betraying everything he believed in, everything that made life worth living. No, he had to speak up and warn the others. . . . Ruthless struggle gives rise to cruel situations. That kind of situation did not arise out of self-interest, but out of life itself, out of the logic of the class struggle. Can't you understand that? In those years the class struggle was at its height. Not the fabricated struggle proclaimed by Stalin later on to

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\* Village correspondent.—Ed.

justify his lawless rule, but something real and merciless. In the later lawless years, in the time of the cult, informers were encouraged. But what personal profit or advantage did Pavlik Morozov get out of denouncing the kulaks? A kulaks' bullet in his brains, that's what he got."

"We're getting away from the point," Victor said. "You want to convince me that people ought to be guided in all their behaviour by some big truth, some cast-iron principle. But I contend that as a person goes through life he runs into thousands of different situations and he must take thousands of decisions depending on those situations. And if instead of taking counsel of his own conscience he starts collating everything with holy writ he'll develop into a heartless robot and do harm to himself and to others."

"But the experience of the older generation. . . ."

"Ah, the experience of the older generation! It's you who made such a mess of everything, you, the older generation. Don't mind my saying so, Vladimir Andreyevich, I don't mean you personally, you yourself were a victim of that experience. But if you are speaking for the older generation, I'm speaking for many of my contemporaries. You tell us what went wrong."

"Very well," Zavyalov said. "I'll tell you the way I understand it. You stand there, a knight without fear or reproach, challenging the older generation and flinging your gauntlet in its face. You're all guilty, you say. True, you're gracious enough to grant me an amnesty because I myself was a victim of those times. You, so to speak, generously grant me the right to drop out of the ranks of that older generation, take my stand beside you and spit in the face of my contemporaries."

"All right, I'll tell you a story. It's about a certain general. He was already an officer at the time of the Revolution. A tsarist officer, of course. He was a count or prince or something, a member of the aristocracy, in short. Well, in 1917 he joined our side. Later on, the Cheka almost nabbed him by mistake, but Dzerzhinsky intervened personally. He joined the Red Army and



eventually became a Soviet general. But in thirty-seven he was arrested. There was no Dzerzhinsky to intervene for him then. In 1941, when the Germans were advancing on Moscow, Stalin, it's said, had the general brought to him. 'This is no time to be in prison,' Stalin said, you ought to be defending your country.' Well, the general could have said a lot in reply to that lame joke. But he was a soldier and he replied briefly that he was ready to serve. They gave him a division to command. And that division was surrounded. They fought desperately to break through to our lines again, but the Germans killed most of them and took the general prisoner.

"The fascists," Zavyalov continued, "shot the survivors or put them behind barbed wire, out there in the snow—it was winter. But they put the general in a warm comfortable house with a sentry at the gate. Whether he was there to see that he didn't escape or as a mark of honour I don't know. A couple of days passed. Then the general was called in for interrogation. No, not called in—a German general, the army commander, came personally to see him.

"'Good morning,' said the German. 'I have the honour to congratulate you on your escape from the land of barbarians. What language does Your Excellency prefer to speak: German, French or English?'

"The general said nothing.

"'We know everything about you, General,' the German went on. 'You are a former tsarist officer, a member of an aristocratic family. You were arrested. Though you were innocent they kept you in prison for four years. You've had the good luck to fall into our hands. Better late than never. Allow me to present myself—Baron von So-and-so.'

"'How d'you do,' our general replied. He had very good manners, naturally.

"'Everything is clear to us, General,' the German went on. 'The fact that you happened to be on the side of the Bolsheviks is a paradox, a silly misunderstanding. Now you are going to live among people who are your equals in origin, education and breeding. We shall

gladly offer you a command in the army of your compatriot, General Vlasov, or, if you prefer, we'll send you to Berlin to work on the General Staff. There are just a few formalities to be attended to. You will tell my chief of operations what you know about the location of Soviet units on my sector of the front, then we'll provide you with a plane. . . .'

" 'But, Your Excellency,' our general interrupted (he was, I repeat, an exceptionally polite man), 'but how can I, an officer who has taken an oath of loyalty to the Red Army, break my oath and give you the information you seek?'

" 'You're joking, General,' the German said. 'An oath! Loyalty! What can such words mean in the society you had to live in? They don't believe in God there, do they? Can they attach the same importance to these terms as we, professional officers of civilised armies, do?'

" 'Nevertheless, I did take an oath of allegiance, General.'

" 'Very well,' the German said. 'I apologise. I was tactless. You're tired. We'll postpone this conversation till tomorrow. Think it over. And remember, you're not a prisoner. You've simply come home after a long and terrible journey.'

"Next day the German general came again.

" 'Well,' he asked, 'do you agree?'

" 'Excuse me, Your Excellency,' our general replied politely, 'I have already told you that I am under oath.'

" 'But, damn it all,' said the German, growing angry. 'You can take an oath only to God, whom they don't believe in on that side of the front, or to those who represent God on earth.'

" 'I'm not very well up in theological matters,' the general replied, 'but I have a somewhat different conception of this matter. You see, in the country which I have the honour to serve as a citizen and officer, they swear allegiance to the people.'

" 'The people!' the German broke in. 'What are you talking about—you, an aristocrat, a tsarist officer? What

people? That trash! That mob! That herd of cowed, ignorant people!

"'Excuse me, Your Excellency,' our general interrupted, 'I am astonished how badly informed you are. The people about whom you speak so contemptuously have built a society of which generations of the best men in the world have dreamed. And I myself have had the honour to take part in the building of that society. You might say I lived for it. And I took an oath of allegiance to it.'

"'I cannot believe my ears,' the German said with a shrug. 'I am going to postpone our final talk once more. Please think it all over and weigh up the pros and cons. And if you have any requests, if there's anything you want. . . .'

"'There is one thing,' said the general. 'I would like to be transferred from this house to the place where you are keeping my officers and men. As a professional soldier you'll understand that my honour as an officer doesn't allow me. . . .'

"They shifted him. They put him out in the snow behind barbed wire. Not immediately, however. For some days the German general went on trying to persuade him to defect, to spit in the face of the people and the generation he felt he belonged to. He replied with old-fashioned courtesy—he was an old man, you see—but he was firm. Then they transferred him to the camp. To the worst part of it. He fell ill. Again and again they urged him to defect. He was coughing up blood but he went on referring to his oath of allegiance.

"At last he could contain himself no longer and forgetting for once to be polite he said to the German general: 'I'm sickened by all this, General. Only a man lacking all sense of honour, a *Landsknecht* who judges everything by his own standards, could imagine that a Russian Soviet officer can become a traitor. You are an ill-bred and tiresome person, Your Excellency. Please go to hell and leave me alone. To hell with you.'

"Then they buried him, old and sick and spitting blood, shoulder-deep in a snowdrift. That baron, the

army commander, didn't show up again. It was a common soldier from an SS squad who was ordered to put the last question. He went up to the general who was losing consciousness and was almost frozen, and said: 'Do you agree?'

"'Be good to my soldiers, brother,' the general replied. 'After all, you're a human being. . . .'"

Zavyalov fell silent. Then he said:

"You'll probably ask me why I told you this story. All right, I'll tell you. Because of what you said about the older generation. Do you get what I'm driving at? And there's another thing I want to ask, Victor. You keep saying 'the cult', 'the period of the cult'. What do you understand by those words?"

"A grim period in our history," Victor replied promptly. "A time when innocent people were thrown into prison, when truth was suppressed, when. . . . But why are you asking me such elementary questions, Vladimir Andreyevich? Surely it's all clear to you."

"No," said Zavyalov, "it's not all clear to me yet. I differ in this from you, Victor. You think the whole thing is as simple as the ABC. But I've no doubts as far as the main question is concerned. You use the term 'cult' to describe a whole epoch. There was the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and the period of the cult. . . . I asked you what the term meant to you. And you answered: the time of lawlessness, of the suppression of the truth. I don't agree with you."

"You don't agree?" Victor exclaimed with genuine surprise. "You, a man who suffered personally from the cult! Did I hear right? Surely you're not sorry an end has been put to it?"

"No, Victor, I'm not sorry. I'm glad. But before I agree with you or go on arguing I have to know what meaning you give to those words 'the period of the personality cult'. I'm afraid you are seeing a whole period of our history as nothing more than a time of lawlessness, falsity and despotism."

"And you?"

"I? Oh no, I see it as a much more complicated business. I was a mere lad in the years of the First Five-Year Plan, but I remember everything. I remember seeing my father off when he went to work in the political department of the MTS. I remember the Moscow electrical appliances factory being the first in the country to complete the five-year plan in two and a half years, the rescue of the Chelyuskin crew and the return of Chkalov, Baidukov and Belyakov from their trans-Atlantic flight. I was in the crowd on Gorky Street that day. People lined the pavements from the Byelorusskaya Station all the way to the Kremlin. They threw flowers. The sun was shining. The radio played *The Song of the Motherland*—it was a new song. I remember the Spanish war. I remember everything, Victor, everything. I saw Marina Raskova and Grizodubova, I saw Fedoseyenko, Vasenko and Usyskin going up in their stratospheric balloon—I suppose you've never even heard their names. But I remember them to this day. They wanted to go up higher than anyone had ever risen, they wanted the Soviet flag to fly higher than any other flag had ever flown, but they perished, all three of them. Usyskin was a Komsomol, the other two were older men, veterans of the Civil War. Usyskin was your age. That's two generations for you. When their balloon was falling they kept a log so that people should know. . . . They were buried in the Kremlin wall. Have you ever been there, at the walls of the Kremlin? Go one day. Read the names on the marble tablets there. I went to Red Square the day those three were buried. That was a long time ago, more than twenty years, but I remember it, I remember everything. And then the war. Gastello and Matrosov and Zoya, Panfilov and his men—why, they weren't fighting in defence of the cult. And I too grew up to be a man in those years. . . ."

"But in those very same years you were deprived of the right to fly!"

"That's true. All the same, I can't call those years simply the period of the cult, as you do, because so

many splendid things were accomplished then, because millions of people—and I among them—believed in the rightness of what we were doing. We did those things not in fear and compulsion but because we could not live differently.”

“But what about the cult?” cried Victor. “Why are you holding out on that?”

“I’m not. It threw a dark shadow across our lives. People were full of initiative, their energy was tremendous but it was shackled and restricted and subordinated to rigid dogmas. We’d have shed less blood in the war too if it hadn’t been for the cult and everything connected with it. So how can I keep silent about it? But you see the period of the cult only as a time of troubles, a series of crimes and mistakes. While I contend that in no period of our history did crimes and mistakes make up the entire content of that particular period. That’s where you and I differ.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you, Vladimir Andreyevich,” said Victor after a pause. “I think I’ll go for a walk. All right?” He glanced at his watch. “I have to meet someone.”

He left.

Zavyalov sat for a long time without moving, thinking about their conversation.

“I haven’t convinced Victor of anything. He hasn’t given up a single one of his strange, absurd ideas. I must be a poor propagandist. Well, we all have to learn afresh. We must learn to convince others. Good and evil, conscience, truth, honesty, cowardice and courage—we didn’t often discuss those in the past. Everything seemed predetermined, pre-arranged in its right place. And now those terms and concepts are spinning in the air, flitting about like wasps and stinging youngsters like Victor. . . . And we say nothing. . . . But, after all, those things aren’t easy to explain. There’s a lot I don’t understand myself. For years we lived on quotations, on grandiloquent phrases which we chewed and chewed over. Take the fourth chapter of the *History of the Communist*

*Party, Short Course.* They referred to it on every occasion, calling it the work of 'that genius, Comrade Stalin'...."

An unexpected thought came into his mind. What about himself? Couldn't he have been more eloquent, more convincing in his argument with Victor? Why had he let the fellow draw him on to his own ground in the discussion? He, Zavyalov, hadn't begotten the personality cult. He'd been busy creating other things, side by side with millions of rank-and-file people. Things the country was proud of. So why couldn't he find the right words to use? He'd fallen down on the job, grown confused because he couldn't blame it all on others. He himself was to blame too. For too long he'd been nursing his injured pride. He'd accepted that role. He'd convinced himself that the injustice he'd had to bear shaped the whole of his future life. He'd grown reconciled to being a bird with a broken wing, a cormorant on a lead. Simonyuk had understood it at once. He got frightened when he sensed there was a difference in his, Zavyalov's, words and intentions, he saw in them a challenge, a reproach. And the fault was his own, all his own. He'd been inert for too long. He'd smouldered instead of bursting into flame. That was why his mind had failed to kindle during the argument with Victor. Incidentally, where had Victor gone? For a walk on the boulevard? Or along Gorky Street? Alone? He said he had to meet someone. Perhaps he had a date with a girl?

Night was drawing on....

## 8. A VICIOUS CIRCLE

Three days passed. Zavyalov again sat in the narrow corridor, lit only by the dim light of a dusty bulb hanging from the ceiling, near the door with the plate "K. M. Prokhorova".

In the office everything was the same as before. Nothing had changed, except Prokhorova. He noticed the difference at once. She looked more haggard than ever, her cheekbones had grown more prominent and her eyes seemed troubled.

"My name is Zavyalov," he began, feeling certain that this woman who had to see so many people every day would have forgotten him.

"Vladimir Andreyevich Zavyalov," she said in a low voice as though to herself. "Sit down."

He dropped into a chair. Prokhorova reached into a safe behind her, the door of which was ajar, and took out a thin folder.

"Vladimir Andreyevich Zavyalov," she repeated, looking at the folder. Again her voice sounded remote.

"What has happened to the woman?" Zavyalov asked himself. "Has she been ill? Or is she ill now?"

"There's no news yet," Prokhorova said, and now her manner was professional and her voice sounded as dry and grating as before. She opened the folder. "We sent two enquiries. One to the main personnel department of the Ministry of Defence, the other to the awards department. The personnel department has replied. We haven't heard from the awards department yet. You're too impatient," she added reproachfully.



"If you'd . . ." Zavyalov began.

"Read this," she cut him short, and handed him the folder.

On the thinnest of copy-paper was typed:

## MAIN PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT

### *Archives of the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Defence*

In reply to your enquiry No. 821/09 we inform you that according to the archives of the MPD Senior Sergeant Olga Mironova, born 1924, is listed as serving in the 18th Air Division on the Volkhov front. She lost her life on March 14, 1944, on active service. Nearest relative—her mother's sister—lives in Astrakhan, 15 Sovetskaya Street, Apt. 1.

*Signature*

Zavyalov reread the harsh, official lines. "As serving" . . . "lost her life" . . . These did not seem to go together. "But everything could be made to go together on paper," he thought and pushed the folder aside.

"Read it?" Prokhorova asked briskly.

"Yes," Zavyalov replied under his breath.

"Well, now we'll wait for the awards department to reply. We'll see what information they have."

"Will that take long?"

"I don't know. Yours isn't the only case they have to look into. If they take too long we'll send them a reminder." She spoke in a cold, mechanical, lifeless tone. A person like her would make the gladdest news sound like a notification of death.

"But why don't you make enquiries in Astrakhan?" asked Zavyalov, his voice rising a pitch or two. "It says here that her aunt lives in Astrakhan. That's right. In 1941, when we first met, she was on her way to Astrakhan to stay with her aunt. Why didn't you ask about her there? I can't imagine how I could have forgotten it myself."

"All in good time," Prokhorova interrupted him peremptorily.

"Listen," said Zavyalov, barely able to control his temper. "Can't you be more human? Surely you're not

quite incapable of understanding the suffering of others?"

His words had a frightening effect. Prokhorova suddenly turned pale, her thin, parched lips trembled, her hands groped aimlessly about the desk, searching for something—a handkerchief, water. . . .

"What's the matter?" Zavyalov mumbled in perplexity. "Are you feeling ill? D'you want some water?"

But it soon passed. Prokhorova regained control of herself. Her parched lips were compressed again, her hands rested calmly on the desk. Only the pallor remained.

"I'm sorry, I know I offended you," said Zavyalov as gently as he could. "It was rude and tactless of me. It's hard for a person in my situation to remember that you have hundreds of cases to deal with. I understand it easily enough but it's difficult to accept the fact. All I want is for you to. . . ."

The telephone rang. Prokhorova quickly took up the receiver and said:

"Yes."

She listened in silence for a few seconds. Then she said: "I'll come at once," and dropped the receiver onto its cradle.

With trembling hands she began to stuff the papers that lay on her desk into the safe. Then she looked at Zavyalov as if seeing him for the first time in her life and said:

"Excuse me, but . . . I can't go on . . . my daughter . . . my daughter . . . her child is dying."

Words of apology rose to Zavyalov's lips but he could not give them voice. What a fool, what a heartless idiot he was! How could he have. . . .

Prokhorova finished putting her papers away, locked the safe and took her militia beret off the top. She ran to the door but before she got there she swayed and would probably have fallen had Zavyalov not supported her.

He helped her out into the street. She seemed oblivious of his presence, of the arm he gave her.

She hurried to the trolleybus stop. There was a queue, and Zavyalov saw that she would have to wait a long time.

"Wait here," he said and ran into the middle of the road to stop a taxi. He felt the same desperate resolve which in wartime had sometimes compelled him to whip out his revolver and shout that he'd shoot holes in their tyres if the drivers, racing past him in their trucks, Dodges and Studebakers, did not stop and pick him up.

There was not a taxi in sight! He stood in the middle of the road. It had just stopped raining, and the cars speeding past sprayed him with the water.

He turned to look at Prokhorova. She stood leaning against the wall, on the point of fainting. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Zavyalov threw his arms wide and rushed towards an oncoming black limousine. There was a shriek of brakes and a volley of abuse from the driver who, opening his door, yelled that he'd call a militiaman, that the car belonged to a Minister, and so on and so forth. But his cursing fell on deaf ears. All Zavyalov saw was that there were no passengers inside.

"You've got to give us a lift... it's an emergency!" he shouted.

"The hell I will!" the driver raged on.

"Shut up!" Zavyalov ordered peremptorily and motioned Prokhorova to come.

The sharpness of his tone did the trick. Or maybe it was Prokhorova's uniform. The driver submitted and asked in a low voice: "Where to?"

"Just drive on," Zavyalov told him, getting in after Prokhorova.

Sitting beside her on the rear seat which was covered with a rug, Zavyalov asked himself where he was going and why. Was he not making a nuisance of himself? The woman was almost a total stranger to him, she had enough troubles of her own, so why must he tag along?

But getting into the car with her had been more instinctive than deliberate. She was obviously in a bad way, so he couldn't leave her alone. And the driver might be rude to her.

Making an effort, Prokhorova gave the driver an address. The car was moving fast along the Leningrad Highway. She sat huddled in the left-hand corner, her eyes fixed on the bright nickel-plated ashtray on the back of the driver's seat. They passed the Byelorusskaya Station and headed for Krasin Street. Within minutes the car drew up at a new block of flats. Building debris was still heaped outside the entrance.

Zavyalov got out of the car, reached into his pocket for some money and handed the driver a ten-ruble note through the open window of the cab.

"Thanks for the lift," he said.

The driver gave Prokhorova a wary glance.

"It's all right, take it," Zavyalov said, tossed the money on the driver's seat and hurried after Prokhorova. "Well, here we are. You're home now. I hope everything will be all right."

She did not seem to hear him. She was almost running to the door. He was about to turn back and go on his way when he saw how faltering her steps had become again. He took her by the arm, afraid that she might fall.

"Are you feeling bad again?" he asked. "What floor is it? Is there a lift?"

"I'm sorry," she said, breathing hard. "I have asthma. And I feel dizzy—my head. . . . It's the fourth floor. Please take me there, if it's not too much trouble."

The lift had just taken someone up. Prokhorova dashed towards the stairs.

"Wait for the lift," Zavyalov urged her.

"No, no, I must hurry!" Leaning heavily on Zavyalov's arm she started up the stairs.

They reached the fourth floor. Prokhorova pressed the bell and then knocked on the door. An elderly woman opened it.

"Liza. . . . Where's Liza?" Prokhorova asked.

"Don't worry, dear. She's gone to the hospital. They took the baby there by ambulance a little while ago and Liza went along. She asked me to wait here for you."

"How is he?" Prokhorova asked, breathing heavily.

"He was taken bad about noon. Crying all the time, and all blue. Liza went to the chemist's and I stayed with the little mite. Later he seemed to get better but in an hour he grew worse. All of a tremble and foaming at the mouth. Liza rang up for the ambulance. The doctor who came with it said they'd have to take him to hospital at once. They just left—five minutes ago."

"Which hospital did they take him to?"

"I don't know. There was such a commotion I forgot to ask. But Liza's with him, he's not alone."

"You must sit down and relax," Zavyalov said to Prokhorova firmly. "Drink some water, take a sedative or something. Have you anything in the house?"

"That's right, that's right," said the woman. "You look after her. Stay with her. I'll be off. My husband must be home and waiting for his supper. Don't take on so, my dear, everything will be all right."

She left.

Zavyalov followed Prokhorova into a small room. There was a strong smell of medicine there. On a little round table in the middle of the room Zavyalov saw some swabs of cotton wool, an open phial and some broken ampules. On the floor near the table stood a basin of water. There was a crumpled towel over the back of a chair.

Without removing her beret Prokhorova sank heavily into an armchair. Her eyes were closed, she breathed with difficulty.

"Where d'you keep the medicine?" Zavyalov asked in a loud voice. "I'll get it for you."

Some time passed before she opened her eyes. She looked at Zavyalov's worried face and asked in a low voice:

"Why are there so many wicked, cruel people in the world? Why?"

"All the same, there are more good people than bad."

"That's what I always thought," she said, shaking her head slowly.

Suddenly, she sprang to her feet. Evidently, the spasm had passed. She pulled off her beret and threw it on the table.

"How can we find out which hospital they've been taken to?" she asked. "We haven't got a telephone yet. We've just moved here."

"We can use the public phone. But whom are we to call? Emergency? We can ring up and ask, of course, but I think we ought to wait a bit. They only left a short while ago. What's wrong with the kid? Has he been ill long? And how old is he anyway?"

"He was born a month ago, and it's been a fight for his life ever since. A week ago we believed he was going to pull through and everything would be all right. Liza brought him back from the maternity home. . . . And now. . . ."

She turned away to the wall and cried. She wept soundlessly, and Zavyalov thought what an enormous effort she must be making to stifle her sobs.

He came and stood close behind her.

"I hardly know you, but I'm sure you are a strong person," he said persuasively. "You must have gone through a lot. And then doing your sort of job. . . ."

"What's wrong with it?" she demanded in an unexpectedly strong voice, turning round sharply to face Zavyalov. "The work I'm doing is splendid, it means bringing joy to people. Did you think it was my idea to ask you why there are so many wicked, cruel people in the world? It wasn't. It's Liza who asked me that last night. And I told her the very thing you said to me just now: there are more good people than bad. But what am I to tell her now? What am I to tell her if the baby dies?"

Zavyalov did not speak. It was quite plain to him that there was some great tragedy here, something else besides the baby's illness. But it would be tactless of him to pry. After all, they were not even friends.

"You must always hope for the best," he said, knowing how trite the words were. "The baby is in the doctor's care and his mother is with him. I'm sure everything will be all right."

She did not seem to hear him. She was so occupied with her thoughts that she might have been miles away. When she spoke it was in answer to herself or some invisible presence.

"Wicked people were less noticeable before, and they weren't always considered wicked either. But now they have been unmasked. There aren't more of them, there are fewer really, but they wear no covering and so they leap to the eye at once. . . . That's what I was trying to tell Liza all last night."

With a start she remembered Zavyalov.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking into his face. "I'm terribly sorry I caused you so much fuss and bother. But if it hadn't been for you I'd have never reached home."

"Oh, rubbish," he mumbled. "D'you want me to go downstairs and telephone?"

"No thanks, I'll do it myself. Go now. I'll be all right. Thank you. Thank you very, very much."

She held a hand out to him. He grasped her thin, dry fingers.

"Just a moment," she said. "I want to tell you. . . . About Astrakhan. We're making enquiries. We wrote as soon as we heard from the Ministry. We can't afford telegrams. But if you wish you can send a telegram there yourself. D'you remember the address?"

"Apartment 1, 15 Sovietskaya Street," Zavyalov replied mechanically. "I'll go there."

"Why do that? Send a telegram first. Go now. Thank you once more."

Zavyalov walked down Gorky Street towards the Central Telegraph Office. He was still under the impression of the events of the past hour. He was wondering what was wrong, there was more to it than the baby's illness, though that in itself was bad enough. A strange

woman, Prokhorova.... She had seemed such a dry stick at first. Of course, grief can soften the hardest nature. But fancy her remembering about Astrakhan at such a moment. Living in that flat with her daughter and her grandchild, the three of them. But what about the father of the child? Where was her daughter's husband? Why hadn't she said a word about him? Where was he? Travelling somewhere? Or perhaps there was no husband?

He walked slowly down the street. The sun shone brightly. The pavement was crowded.

He reached the Telegraph Office. The minute hand on the big white clock face over the entrance jerked convulsively. Young people stood on the broad steps leading up to the glass doors. A favourite rendezvous.

He climbed the steps.



## 9. LENA SPEAKING

**T**his was one of the worst nights for him since his return to Moscow. He had come back full of hope. And now his hopes had been dashed, one after another.

The last time he saw Korostyleva—it was two days ago—she told him, though not in so many words, that there was no use ringing her up any more since she had done everything she could for him. However, to sugar the pill no doubt, she promised to go on with the enquiries and to call him or write to him if anything came up.

It was an empty promise, Zavyalov knew. She just meant well, that's all. And so, he had drawn a blank at the *Looch* magazine, the Missing Persons Department had been no help so far, and the only tangible result of his search was the letter from the Ministry of Defence confirming Olga's death.

He pinned his last remaining hopes on the answer from Astrakhan—the prepaid reply by telegram which was five days overdue already.

It was late afternoon when he got home. Victor was out, and not coming back until eleven at the earliest. The evening before Zavyalov stretched long and dreary. He had only himself for company.... Suddenly the doorbell rang.

It was the postman. Zavyalov signed for the telegram and ripped it open....

After that he sat for a long time at his desk staring stupidly at the grey telegraph form, still unable to grasp the meaning of the two typewritten lines.

Another blank. He had nowhere else to go, no one else to trace, no one else to send telegrams to. . . .

It was the end. Olga was dead. He had made a mistake. The woman in the picture was not Olga. Those who perish in a burning plane do not come back. It wasn't Olga standing on the snow with those strangers. It wasn't Olga. It was some woman he did not know. She just looked like Olga. That's all.

He reached for the photograph. He wanted to tear it up and throw it away. He never again wanted to see the woman who dared to look so much like Olga that he did not for a moment doubt that it was she and then to dash his hopes so cruelly.

The next moment he jerked his hand away, horrified at what he had almost done. He should be grateful to this strange woman. It was to her he owed those three weeks of happiness, excitement and anticipation. If it hadn't been for her he wouldn't have discovered that he had not quite lost all taste for life, that he was still capable of feeling a surge of energy, of wanting something badly enough to strive for it.

But what good was it to him now?

Forget the whole thing. Comrade Kosichkin, a house manager in faraway Astrakhan, has put finis to it. The letter from the Ministry of Defence left him one last hope that was as hazy and elusive as a cloud, as a plume of smoke on a windless day. And now Kosichkin killed it. A puff, and it was gone.

Zavyalov could see him coming to work in the morning and sitting down behind his desk. First he assigned the routine jobs to the plumber, the janitor and the odd-job man, next he refused one tenant's application for repairs and promised to fix another tenant's roof, and then he remembered the telegram with a prepaid reply. And so reply he did: died . . . no relatives. . . . Short and sweet. No more to be said.

The telephone rang.

"Hullo, it's Lena speaking."

"I'm sorry, who did you say?"

"I shouldn't have called you, of course. Especially since you never bothered to ring me in all this time. Now do you know who's speaking?"

Lena? Ah yes, of course it was Lena. The Riga seaside. Everything was coming back to normal.

"Lena, how are you?"

"Now that's more like it."

She had a beautiful speaking voice. Especially on the telephone. Low and gentle.

"I know I shouldn't have rung you up. But I'm a very inquisitive person. Do you think that's a vice?"

Zavyalov did not say anything.

"You do? Oh well, then I have more vices than I thought. I wanted to know how you were getting on, that's all. I hope that old mystery has been nicely solved. Has it? Why don't you answer?"

"Yes, Lena, it has."

"Your voice sounds so queer.... Or has it become strange to me?"

"I suppose it has."

"But I don't want it to. Look, I believe you live somewhere near Nikitsky Gate, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You see I haven't forgotten! I remember all the things we said to one another. Do you? But why don't you say something?"

"I'm listening, Lena."

"Then I have a proposal to make. I'm in Kislovsky Street just now. Shall I drop in to see you for a minute?"

"Yes, do," he said, and suddenly he heard himself repeating loudly, insistently and viciously: "Yes, do, and hurry!"

"You frighten me, Comrade Major! If you're so impatient why did you never give me a ring?"

"We'll talk about it when you get here. Come! You know the address?"

She arrived ten minutes later. Her pale dress had a very low neckline and, like all her clothes, clung to her

body like a skin. She might have bathed in the dress and kept it on to dry.

Lena was there, in his room. She put her long narrow handbag on the desk and began to peel off her sheer red gloves. Zavyalov watched her, thinking: "It's like it used to be. The old life has come back. Here it is. Don't think about anything. Everything will take care of itself. True, there will always be a distance. In width it will equal the thickness of a piece of letter-paper. Infinitesimal, really. But the warmest embrace will not bridge it. Nor the most violent love-making. The two selves can never make one. There will always be a distance. It can't be bridged. And I have no desire to try."

"So this is your home," Lena said, sitting down in the armchair beside the radio. "Do you live here all by yourself?"

"Not at the moment. I have a cousin staying with me. He comes from Leningrad."

He perched on the arm of her chair and ran his hand over her gleaming blonde hair.

"No, wait," Lena said, moving her head away slightly. "Get me some water please. I'm terribly thirsty."

"What a stupid old trick!" Zavyalov commented to himself, but anyway he got up, went into the kitchen and ran the tap.

"How easily everything comes back," he mused. "Things you don't want very much and aren't looking forward to particularly. It's like the tide. The sea comes back to flood that which it had revealed to the sight of men for a little while: sand, as soft as a baby's skin, bits of petrified wood, the wreckage of great ships belonging to another day. . . . And then the water covers everything again. And there is only the beach, the ordinary familiar beach that countless feet had trampled before you. . . ."

"Where's the water, Zavyalov?" Lena called out. "What are you filling—a glass or a pail?"

He wasn't filling anything. The water gushed from the tap, hitting the bottom of the sink and sending up a

spray. He turned the tap, leaving a mere trickle, and filled a glass.

Lena took a tiny sip and put the glass down on the desk.

"We can talk now," she announced. "I'm devoured by curiosity. What did happen anyway?"

Zavyalov stood facing Lena across the room, looking at her long sun-tanned legs, and thinking: I wish she'd talk less. I wish she wouldn't talk at all.

"Tell me, I'm waiting to hear," she insisted.

I suppose I have to go through that too, he thought, and aloud he said: "It was a mistake, Lena. A misunderstanding, rather. It's all been cleared up now."

"What mistake?"

"God, what difference does it make!" he said rudely.

"Oh yes, it does make a difference."

How insistent she was. She was obviously bent on getting an answer.

At the rest home she had been the one to give in. She had tried everything to make him stay with her. She had been willing to humble herself, to agree to anything, to ask no questions. None of it had helped at all. He had left her. And now he was looking at her as he used to on the beach, before the "magazine thing" happened. Oh well, this was her hour of triumph!

He came and sat on the arm-rest again, and touched her slender neck with the tips of his fingers.

She did not move away, nor did she make a movement towards him.

"Go on. I'm listening."

"Do I have to talk?"

"You do," Lena said coolly.

All right, I'll tell her, he decided. I'll answer her question. And then I'll forget everything. For half an hour.

Aloud he said: "Very well. I'll tell you about it. I saw a picture in that old magazine, there at the rest home, and I imagined it was someone who was killed in the war."

"That's not true. If he was killed, as you say, how could anyone take a picture of him?"

"I thought that maybe the original report was wrong."

"Who is this person? A relative of yours?"

"No. Just a friend."

"D'you mean to say you left me there all alone for the sake of a mere friend?"

"I couldn't have acted differently then, Lena. Nothing could have stopped me."

"Obviously, I couldn't either."

"It had nothing to do with you."

He caressed her neck. The skin felt as smooth and cool as the sand at ebb tide. She leaned back a little and half-closed her eyes.

"It was awful when you left," she told him. "I wandered about like a lost soul. And all those people who had seen us together looked at me with pity. I hate to be pitied. I hate it when people think I've been dumped...."

She leaned her head back further. Her hair touched his hand.

He stood up and held his arms out to her. Now she would give him her hands and everything would disappear, the lines would run together as they do on the screen of a TV set when something goes wrong with it, the picture would become narrower and narrower until nothing remained but a streak of light. And then that, too, would flare up and vanish, and the screen would become a dead, blank surface. And after that would come forgetfulness.

But Lena did not want to come into his arms yet. She wanted to talk.

"The stories I had to make up! I told everyone that you were called away urgently. No one believed me. I saw it in their faces. That bookkeeper's especially, the one who roomed with you.... Tell me you're sorry at least that everything went so stupidly wrong."

"I'm sorry," he said in a loud, resentful voice.

"Just think, we might have stayed there longer, enjoying the sea breezes instead of suffocating in the Moscow heat. Swimming together. . . . Going down to the beach at night. . . . Walking as far as the dunes. . . . D'you remember?"

"I do. Give me your hands. . . ."

The telephone rang. He did not even turn round at the sound.

"Go on, answer the telephone," Lena told him.

"I don't want to. Give me your hands. . . ."

But she held back. She had more to say.

"Look, couldn't we go somewhere else now? If only for a fortnight. Or even ten days! We might fly to Sochi, to the sea. No, let's go to Bakuriani, I'd rather. I've never been there. They say you can go skiing there in the summer too. I saw a picture of it in *Ogonyok* the other day. A beautiful summer day, sunlight and snow, and you don't have to wear much more than your bathing suit for skiing. . . . Do let's go there. If not there, at least let's get out of the city and go where there's a river. . . ."

"All right, we'll go. Come on, give me your hands."

But Lena put her hands behind her head and looked straight into his eyes.

"Wait," she said. "There's no hurry. I've got the blues. I wonder why? D'you know? I don't, either. That's a lie, I do know. . . . I wish you'd marry me."

He stepped back in astonishment.

"No need to be so surprised or frightened, please," Lena said. "Can't you take a joke? But then maybe I'm not joking."

"But why do you want to get married? What for?" Zavyalov asked, imitating Lena's bantering tone.

"Don't rush into marriage, girls, being married isn't fun," she chanted the words of a song as though she were thinking aloud. And then with a wry smile she asked: "What is fun? What is fun, d'you know?"

"The kingdom of heaven is within us," he answered with a little smile. "However, we'll have plenty of time to discuss this later."

"No, we won't. I know it's silly of me. . . ."

"What is?"

"Oh, this conversation and everything. Only I do feel blue. Ridiculous, isn't it? But listen, Zavyalov, I really want to get married."

"But where do I come in?" he almost blurted out, but instead he said: "With your looks it can't be too much of a problem."

"Thanks for the sympathy. But really, you know, something has happened to me. No one will marry me now. You'd be a fool if you did. No, you wouldn't. It would be a very sensible thing to do. So sensible, in fact, that even a man as sensible as you wouldn't be up to it. But I'd make you a good wife, d'you know that?"

"Maybe we'd better put off this conversation till another time?" he asked impatiently.

"No. We'll just stop it. I know what I'm expected to do now. I'm supposed to hold my hands out to you, get up, and let you take me through that door into the other room where you have a bed or maybe a couch, I haven't had time to see which. On the whole you're right, of course. Only something's come over me, a whim. Or maybe it's the blues. I want to talk. Give me another five minutes. Will you?"

He shrugged resignedly.

"I was married, you know. Three times, that's how quick I am! D'you know who was my first husband? A general. And our family friends were all generals, directors of large enterprises, and even two Ministers. . . . And every darned one of them would have been only too pleased to marry me. I'm sure of it. Even the ones who were married already. They'd have left their wives for me. You think they wouldn't have? I put them to the test, so I know. When my husband was demoted and expelled from the Party for grabbing too much stuff in the last year of war, he left me of his own accord. Apparently he thought that being minus his gold braid and his Party card he had no right to keep me tied to him. Then I married someone else. He was an NKVD



man. One of the higher-ups. Only soon afterwards they had some big rumpus there and he was put in jail. It was an awful time for me, I actually kept a bag all ready and packed. All those people who used to come and see us were headed for trouble. One would get demoted, another would be arrested, a third would get banished to the provinces. . . . Everyone drank a lot, worked nights, and wondered where they would be the next day. I had to adapt myself to all this, and I did. When my general did the vanishing trick, I counted 'One!'—and married someone else. When that one went to jail, I said 'Two!'—and married my third husband. He was head of some central board. I lived with him for two years, and, imagine, he managed not to get demoted or jailed in all that time! He died in a car crash. It happened at the end of 1953. I was very sorry for him. And then I got over it: life is life, after all. I counted 'Three!'—and misfired. I looked about me and saw that there was nobody there. Can you imagine? All I had to do before was close my eyes, say 'One!' and open them to see someone highly eligible, all ready and waiting for me. And this time there was nobody there. A bad miss. There's something the matter with people nowadays. There's some change. I don't know what it is. Only suddenly nobody wants me. Everybody has become very staid or something. . . . Am I boring you?"

"No, why?"

"A jolly little tale, don't you think? Nobody wants to marry me. They'll go to bed with me any night. But they don't want to live with a wife who's so beautiful, so smart and so very experienced. And this, mind you, when on top of everything else I've become really good at washing clothes and scrubbing floors! Very funny. . . . That's all, now I feel all right again. Enough of talking, high time for some love-making."

Slowly, she held out her hands to him. He pulled her to her feet, held her close, and stroked her bare sloping shoulders.

"Wait, I'll rub my lipstick off. I hate to have it smeared."

She twisted free of his embrace, turned to the desk on which she had put her long smart bag, and her glance fell on the photograph.

She looked at it while she opened her bag and took out her mirror and a bit of cotton wool.

"What a very queer picture," she observed casually, carefully rubbing off her lipstick and glancing into her mirror now and again. "Are you in it too? No, I can't find you. What a dreary bunch of people! Where was it taken?"

"I don't know," Zavyalov answered in a muffled voice.

She gave her clean lips a final rub, put the soiled wad of cotton wool and the mirror back in her bag, and turned to Zavyalov.

But he wasn't there behind her. He was standing half-face to the window across the room. Something was wrong. Lena sensed it from his attitude, from the sudden change of expression on his face, from the very fact that he had moved away to the other end of the room and remained there, making no move towards her.

Only a minute before she had felt the urgency of his desire with every fibre of her responsive body. And now this. She felt tricked in a very mean way. It was as annoying as having everyone laugh at you in some blindfold game and realising, as soon as the handkerchief has been removed from your eyes, that your walk must have been ugly and awkward and your sense of direction ridiculously wrong.

"Well, where are you?" she said, feeling unsure of her ground.

He did not make a move.

"It was a mistake, Lena," he said in the voice of a stranger. "This reunion, I mean."

"It was?" Lena asked in perplexity. "But you told me you wanted to see me, didn't you?"

"I lied to you. I don't want to see you. We're not going anywhere. Neither to Sochi, nor Bakuriani, nor the river. Nowhere. I know it definitely now. And I shouldn't have asked you to come here. You're not to

blame for anything. The fault is entirely mine. And now you'd better go."

It looked as if he was throwing her out! Tears welled up in her eyes. From the insult, from the unexpectedness of it, from self-pity. Still, she tried to regain her poise. She even smiled—a mirthless, sickly smile....

"This is quite a novel experience for me," she said. "Not wanting to marry me is one thing, but refusing to go to bed with me!"

He came close to her then and put his hands on her bare shoulders. No, no, he did not touch her as a lover, she could feel it, she understood. There was no intimacy in his hands.

"I didn't know it would be like this, Lena," he said, looking at her with dull, indifferent eyes. "I thought my will was stronger. I wanted to force myself. To overcome this thing in me. But I can't. Forgive me."

Roughly, she pushed his hands away.

"You ... you're a miserable, feeble neurotic," she stammered, choking with fury. "I made the first step ... I rang you up. ... Why did you ask me to come here? Why?"

He said nothing. And suddenly the answer dawned on her.

"Listen," she said. "This person ... I mean the one who was killed but wasn't. ... Is it a woman?"

"I don't wish. ... I can't talk about it."

"You don't wish. ... You can't! But what about me?" Lena exclaimed, her voice swelling with bitterness and spite. "You think you're the only one who has feelings? Oh yes, all is permitted you, all is allowed! First you say come, then you say go. ... And my rival all this time is a shadow, a ghost, and you won't even deign to tell me who it is! Who is this woman, what's her name? I'm asking you, d'you hear? Maybe she's coming here tonight after I've gone?"

"She's not coming."

"You'll come running to me yet, mark my words. It's the current fashion to resurrect the dead. I know. It's done nowadays. Everybody wants to put everything

right, to bring back the men and women who are gone, but there are no bones even, no graves. . . ."

No, no, all this is a lie! Zavyalov said to himself. It's not just a fashion and the efforts are not in vain. Everything must be put right, all those who can be brought back must be brought back, and those who can't, must be remembered. I can hear Olga calling me, whether she's dead or living. She's not a shadow behind me, she is there, in front. . . .

"Have you got anything to say?" Lena demanded fiercely. "You've got to answer me: why did you ask me to come here?"

"I did not. You told me you wanted to drop in."

"Oh, I see. You're blaming me now!"

"Lena, don't."

"Don't what? Yes, I did want to see you, I did want to because I believed you still had need of me. And you . . . you're mentally unsound, that's all. Never mind, one day you'll come begging me to come back to you. You'll get tired of living with your shadows, with your dead who won't be resurrected. But it will be too late. Can you understand that: too late."

"Yes, I can understand it," he said humbly and wearily.

"Stay alone then. I'm leaving. This is the last time. You won't see me again."

She snatched up her bag, her red gloves, and went out of the room. He could hear her fumbling with the lock on the front door, but he stood where he was, unable to make a step to help her.

At last the door slammed shut. She was gone. . . .

He went to the open window and looked down. He saw her come out, stop for a moment to open her bag, take out her mirror and lipstick, and then, holding the bag under her arm, paint her lips with two quick strokes.

He watched her cross the street—a tall, slender woman in a clinging dress that outlined her long legs, the best looking and the least desirable of women.

## 10. A THIN RAY OF LIGHT

**S**he had already turned the corner, but he still stood staring out of the window. He went on thinking about Lena a little longer. In his mind's eye he saw her walking down the boulevard to Pushkin Square, her feet smart in their spike-heeled shoes, swinging her hips a little, drawing the eyes of all the men sitting about on the benches.

"One day you'll come begging me..." No, Lena, I won't. Some other man will ring you up. Or you will call him....

He watched the traffic streaming by, the hand of the electric clock across the street jerking every minute, the traffic lights flaring up red, then yellow, then green... yellow again, red....

The street lamps went on. A queue assembled quickly at the lemonade stand and was as quickly served.

An officer came along. From where he was Zavyalov couldn't see the stars on his shoulder pieces. He was very young. Must be a lieutenant. He turned at the corner and made for the boulevard. And here was a young couple. He had on a check shirt, the short sleeves turned up. She wore a pearl-grey raincoat and high-heeled slippers. These two were sure to be going to the boulevard. No, they turned the corner. They were crossing the street now. Oh, they were headed for the cinema. Look at that old gentleman with the small white goatee, spectacles, and a loose coat made of some white stuff like shantung. He must be a professor. A stage character. But maybe he was a retired accountant, and not a professor

at all. The boulevard for him, naturally. He'd sit and dream there until dark. . . . There goes a drunk, lurching into every doorway. He's found the shop at last. He thinks he hasn't had enough, so he's going to look for two others to go shares with him in a bottle of vodka. . . . A woman with a bulging string bag. . . . A man in a straw hat with a briefcase in his hand. . . . A young girl. . . . She's looking at all the house numbers, she's not sure of the address. Yes, that's it. Now she's taken out a piece of paper and is making sure. She walks with greater confidence, but only for about ten metres, she looks at the number again and goes back. She's quite confused, evidently. She's starting across the street over to his side, there she is now, exactly opposite his window. Should he call down to her and offer his help? She's reached the middle of the street and has to stand there, between the two lanes of traffic, waiting for the cars to swish past. A very young girl. About nineteen, if that. A slender little thing in a polka-dot dress. There's a break in the stream of cars and she can run across.

Zavyalov leaned out of the window. He did not know why. It was plain curiosity, nothing else.

She had stopped right underneath. He saw her craning her neck to look at the number, and then hurry inside. Idly, he tried to guess which of the tenants she was calling on: the dressmaker on the first floor, the dentist on the third, or the Yegorovs, perhaps? They had a son, a young fellow, a university student. His subject was radioelectronics. A popular profession nowadays. Was it him she wanted to see?

A man and a woman, evidently a married couple, were slowly lugging a big cardboard packing case tied with rope. Must be a radio or a TV set. A pretty heavy thing to carry. . . .

Look at that youngster skipping along so happily with an eskimo pie in his hand.

The bell rang. A sharp short ring. Zavyalov didn't realise at once that it was his bell. He thought the

sound came from the street. There was another ring. He hurried to the door.

It was the very girl he had been watching from his window. What a surprise! But she'd come to the wrong door, of course.

"Does Comrade Zavyalov live here?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, puzzled.

"Are you Comrade Zavyalov?"

The girl stepped in hesitantly. He closed the door. It was almost dark in the hall.

Suddenly he felt his heart beat faster. No reason for it. Yet he was strangely alarmed.

"I've a message for you from my mother," the girl said. "My name is Prokhorova."

"Oh, yes, of course," Zavyalov mumbled. His lips felt parched.

"She asked me to give you this. It's urgent."

She held out to him a sheet of paper folded in four. He snatched it from her hand.

It was dark. He couldn't make out a word. He hurried into his living room and read:

U.S.S.R. MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

*Awards Department*

In reply to your enquiry No. 0485/16 we inform you that Senior Sergeant Mironova, Olga Alexeyevna, was awarded the Order of the Red Star in 1943 and in 1944 the Order of the Patriotic War, Second Class, for valour displayed in combat with the German invaders. This last decoration was conferred on her personally in 1950 when she was residing in Leningrad at Apartment 8, 14 Malo-Okhtinsky Prospekt.

Assistant Chief of Department  
Major (*signature*)

And below the typed message was written: "Good luck. K. Prokhorova."

Zavyalov stood rooted to the floor. The room swam before his eyes. From far away, as if from somewhere beyond a thick, almost soundproof wall, he heard the girl ask him:

"What's wrong? D'you feel ill?"

The girl, frightened and worried, shook him timidly by the shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Now it had passed. Everything swung into focus again. The room, the open window, the street lamp. The sheet of paper in his numb fingers. The girl.

"I'm all right. Quite all right," he said.

But there were tears in his eyes. The girl looked away. Perhaps she had never seen a man cry, and the sight embarrassed her.

"Mother received the message just before the office closed," she said without looking at him. "She took a copy and asked me to bring it to you. She said it was important."

"Important—that's hardly the word," Zavyalov replied, barely audibly.

"Mother telephoned but there was no reply. She told me that if there was no one at home I was to put the message into the letter-box or slip it under the door. Well, I'll go home now."

Only then did it dawn on Zavyalov who she was. "Mother told me. Mother said..." Why, she must be Liza.

"Are you Liza?" he asked the girl.

"Yes, I'm Liza."

"But . . . but you were in trouble. Your baby boy was ill. Is he better?"

"He died."

She stared at the open window and out into the street at the lamp. Her eyes were dry.

No, she was not nineteen. She was older. There were faint lines at the corner of her eyes. Yet her lips were a young girl's, without a trace of make-up.

Zavyalov was at a loss for words. Condolences, the usual phrases?

He heard a key turn in the front door. That would be Victor.

"Here I am," said Victor as he came into the room.

"Ah, I see you have a visitor."



He glanced at Liza who was standing side-face to him. Zavyalov noticed the rapid change that came over his face. First fear, then a grimace of disgust.

"What are *you* doing here?" Victor asked the girl rudely. Their eyes met. Liza's already pale face turned white. Her lips trembled.

"You! You *here!*" she said faintly. Suddenly her large eyes narrowed and she looked at Victor with hatred.

But that lasted only a second. She rushed out of the room, tore at the front door, fumbled with the lock, and was out on the stairs before Zavyalov could catch up with her. He called her name, but she paid no heed and ran down the stairs. He overtook her in the street. Walking beside her he asked her persistently: "What happened, Liza? D'you know Victor? Answer me, please."

No answer. She walked faster. Now she was almost running. He could hardly keep up with her.

He tried to take her arm but she jerked it away as if his touch were odious to her. And then he took a quick pace forward and barred her way.

"Liza, stop, will you. Do say something. What happened? Do you know Victor? He's my cousin. I have the right to ask. . . ."

"Your cousin?" she broke in. "Your cousin! If I'd known that I'd never have come to your flat. Never, d'you hear? I'd never have gone anywhere near your flat!"

They were standing in the middle of the boulevard. People were looking at them.

"Go away!" Liza said imperatively. "You got your message and now you can leave me in peace. I never want to see you again. None of you. Go away!"

She tried to walk around him.

"No," said Zavyalov firmly. "I can't leave you like this. You must tell me what you have against Victor. What has he done? Has he done you some wrong?"

"I hate him."

"All the more reason to tell me the whole story."

"Tell you? Why should I? So you'd give him a ticking off? Lecture him? *Him!* Let me go home."

"No, you're not going anywhere. We're going to sit down on that bench over there and you're going to tell me everything. I haven't the right to let you go like this. You've just brought me some news that's changed my whole life. You've brought me happiness, d'you understand? And in return you've had a shock, another shock. That's not fair. You haven't the right to leave now. We'll sit down there."

Taking the girl by the arm he led her to the bench.

Liza seemed to lose all the strength that had been driving her on. She followed Zavyalov meekly and sat down beside him on the bench.

"Here we are," he said, "now tell me the whole story. When did you first meet Victor? You must believe me: I'm not asking this out of idle curiosity. I have to know."

"Why? As if that could change anything!"

"Things can change, everything can change," Zavyalov said with conviction. "That's something I know for certain now. I too thought I'd lost everything, that the person who was dearer to me than life was no longer living. But I wanted to believe she was alive and it turned out to be true."

Liza shook her head slowly.

"You never saw her grave," she said. "As long as you don't see the grave you can go on believing. But I . . . I buried my child a week ago. Myself."

He was afraid she was going to break down. But she didn't shed a tear.

"I understand," he said. "It was a terrible loss. Irrevocable. But you're so young. . . ."

"No!" she cried as though frightened by his words. "I feel I've lived a thousand years. A thousand years in the last six months."

"That will pass, Liza. But you must not bottle up your grief. That's the worst thing you can do. It will kill you. Tell me everything and you'll feel better. I'm sure, almost sure, I can help you."

"Help me?" she replied incredulously. "How can you? Tell me, what do you see ahead of you?"

"What do I see?"

"Yes. What do you see ahead of you?" Liza repeated insistently.

"What . . . what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I know too. You see that message. The one I brought you. And beyond it you see life. A road. And at the end of the road the woman you love. But I can't see anything. Only those shrubs, that grass, those street lamps. Nothing else. I feel I've been blinded. I . . . I can't go on. Don't come with me. Please."

She got up and walked slowly along the boulevard.

## 11. LAST SPRING

Liza first met Victor about eighteen months ago, in spring. They went to the same institute, only she was in her first year and he was in his fourth. She lived in the students' hostel—she was on her own in Leningrad.

They met at a literary evening at the institute. Poetry was read and there was a discussion afterwards, in which Victor took part. His criticism was bold and trenchant: he said that all the poems were contrived and specious, they lacked genuine feeling and were written with an eye to the editors who didn't really like the stuff either and published it only because they were careful to fall in with the wishes of those above them. These higher-ups never read any of the poems, yet they were strangely convinced that this type of poetry, which made no impact on the human soul, was the very thing to be encouraged and printed. Liza agreed with him in everything, he was right, because all that poetry was written in the years when laws were being broken, when innocent people were being sent to prison, when falsehood was being passed off as truth.

This happened almost a year before that great meeting of Communists in the Kremlin, which was to be known as the historic Twentieth Party Congress. Not all the t's had yet been crossed then, not all the i's dotted, nor had the document been published yet, the reading of which was to bring smiles and tears to people's faces and fill them with a new faith in the future.

But the winds of change were already blowing. People were already beginning to understand what had not yet been put into so many words.

Among Liza's friends were girls and boys whose parents had suffered in the purge of 1937. Together

with them she rejoiced at their parents' vindication. She was an impressionable girl, and hearing Victor speak she decided that this was a man of the new type, a man who belonged to the new times—cleansed of all falsity and injustice.

The discussion over, Liza went up to Victor and told him how right he was and how much she had enjoyed his speech. They left together and walked for a long time—not mingling with the crowd on the Nevsky or the Islands, but choosing the privacy of darker back streets. Liza didn't care where they went, so long as she could go on listening to Victor talk.

And that was how it all began. A month passed. Liza knew that she had found happiness, nothing was more precious to her than Victor, he was her world and her life. She never asked him if he loved her because she did not doubt it. When two people spend their every free moment together, when they have no secrets from each other, when they both hate the night because it separates them and both wake up with the happy thought that day has come and they can be together again, there's no need to ask. . . .

When Liza told him that they were going to have a baby, he was frightened. He did not say or do anything to show that he was frightened, but Liza knew.

Women, they say, feel deeply injured by such a reaction, taking it as a mortal insult. Not Liza. She loved Victor so much that she felt sorry for him. If anything, she cursed herself for giving him a fright. He was three years her senior, but she felt the older, and now she imagined that he was too young to appreciate the joy of it at once or to realise how much closer this wonderful thing that had happened to them would make them. . . .

But it did not take her long to see that his fright was not a passing thing, and that he was beginning to withdraw from her.

Even then she did not feel injured. She simply decided that he was thinking things over, worried about her and the coming baby. Victor had no home or family,

and so after graduation he would have to take up an appointment in the provinces somewhere, roughing it at first, most likely.

She believed that he was depressed and troubled by the thought that he would not be able to provide properly for her and the baby, and was avoiding her because it embarrassed him to talk about money matters to her.

And then she herself broached the subject frankly. He had nothing to worry about: her mother would take the baby to stay with her in Moscow, and after his graduation and departure for wherever he was appointed to work, she would get transferred to Moscow and live there with them until he was settled down and ready for her and the baby.

Liza looked into his eyes as she spoke, confident that they would light up and he would say what she so wanted to hear.

But he was silent. And then he uttered some of the trite, hackneyed phrases a cad and coward usually says to a woman when she tells him that she is going to have a baby.

She did not call him a cad or a coward, even in her thoughts. She would rather have bitten off her tongue than call Victor that even in thought. He was saying to her that "the thing needed thinking over", that they "had no use for a baby", that he loved her and everything would be as before once she "got rid of it". And she thought listening to him: He doesn't understand, I suppose I haven't made it clear. He just doesn't know what he's saying, he can't see how wonderful everything is, how very, very wonderful, he doesn't understand that he should rejoice and not make those ridiculous suggestions that have nothing to do with us at all. It's my fault, of course, I haven't been able to make him see, make him understand. . . .

A few more days passed, and it became painfully clear to her that she would never hear from Victor what she so wanted to hear. But she loved him despite everything. Only it was a different sort of love, it was queerly

blended with compassion. She had not come to hate him yet. She knew that he did not want to see her, that he was afraid to meet her, so she tried to keep out of his way. She found out his time-table, and if the end of her lectures and seminars coincided with his, she dawdled in class so she should not run into him leaving the building. The thought that she might cause Victor some unpleasantness or make him unhappy held her back. His peace of mind and happiness still came first with her. She was willing to keep out of sight if meeting her upset him.

At the hostel, she shared a room with two other girls. She began to dread the thought of coming home to them. They knew the whole story, and every night they made it the subject of a general discussion, wanting to know if she had seen Victor that day and what she was planning to do next.

At last Liza felt that she could not confide her troubles to them any longer. But even their silent commiseration hurt her unbearably. She tried to stay out as late as she possibly could so the girls would be asleep when she came in, and before going into the room she made sure they were not awake. In the morning she slipped out while they were still asleep.

One day she received a summons to the Komsomol Committee. The Secretary, addressing her in a stern manner full of fatherly overtones, wanted to know what was wrong, what was making her an indifferent student, why was she shunning her friends, and why had she become so moody and irritable.

Liza mumbled something incoherent in reply and rushed out, because even then the very idea of betraying Victor, denigrating him or doing him harm was abhorrent to her.

Next, Liza was called to the dean's office, where the assistant dean, who had evidently found out about her troubles, gave her a scolding for her bad marks and then treated her to a lecture on morals and maidenly virtue.

Liza cut him short rudely, got up and left.

And then the worst happened. . . .

Twice she did not come back to the hostel all night. She was well aware that this might appear suspicious to those who did not know her well. But those were bad days for her, and rather than go home and face her roommates with their alertly enquiring glances, she walked about Leningrad half the night and sat out the remaining hours, secure in her anonymity, in the waiting room of one of the railway stations.

Both times she told her roommates that she had spent the night with friends. The third time it happened, she was called to the dean's office again.

"If you do any more street-walking at night, we'll throw you out," the assistant dean said without looking at her.

This assistant dean, Skiba by name, had a round face and pink, chubby cheeks. Victor hated him and often, in conversation with Liza, passed sarcastic comment on the man's learnedness, jeering at his "professorship" and calling him a businessman and profiteer in science. Victor's violent dislike had probably communicated itself to Liza.

But in that moment she did not remember Victor or his attitude to Skiba. She was exhausted physically and mentally, and besides she was five months pregnant. Skiba's words were like a stinging blow across her face.

She asked him to choose his expressions.

"When talking to a certain type of women one does not need to choose one's expressions," he said, looking her straight in the face now.

She slapped him, putting the full force of her grief, her pain and her ripe but as yet unacknowledged hatred for Victor in this slap.

The next day she was expelled. But the worst blow was yet to fall.

Victor did not come, he did not try to see her. Not even after her expulsion. Not even after the order about it had been posted on the notice board.



The day after that Liza was expelled from the Komsomol. Victor was not present at the meeting. He happened to be out of town that day. It may have been a coincidence, or he may have absented himself on purpose.

After the meeting, Liza went back to the hostel to collect her belongings. She knew she could appeal to the District Komsomol Committee, to the District Party Committee, and even higher up, but it was too horrible to contemplate. It would mean explaining why she had slapped Skiba, making excuses, pleading shot-up nerves, illness, and God knows what else. . . .

Her mind was troubled by thoughts of Victor. How could a person look so honest, be such a zealot of truth and, at the same time, practise such amazing cruelty?

She could still hear his wrathful denunciation of the Pharisees who canted about human dignity and injured it in the same breath. All right, they were hypocrites, but Victor was not, the things he said were true, really true. Did it mean that truth could coexist with falsehood and cruelty? But how could one go on living then? Hoping for what? Believing in what?

Liza did not appeal anywhere. She packed her things and took the next train to Moscow.

She stayed with her mother. The baby was born six weeks later. He lived for five weeks only. . . .

## 12. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Z**avyalov ran up the stairs to his flat. Letting himself in he slammed the door noisily behind him. The sound was enough to waken the dead.

He heard a faint whisper of jazz.

Entering the living room he saw Victor sprawling at ease in his favourite armchair near the radio. Victor turned the switch and the music broke off. The little green light went out.

"You've come at last," Victor said, springing up. "I read that message. Congratulations."

Ah, yes, the message. There it lay on the desk. The thick paper retained its folds. The sharp corners stuck out. Heavens, how could he have forgotten that message even for a minute? He must start packing at once. When did the night train leave for Leningrad?

But before he left, he must hear what Victor had to say.

"So you know that girl?" he asked.

"Who, Liza?" Victor's tone was casual. "Oh, yes, I do. I'm sorry, Vladimir Andreyevich, I'm awfully sorry she got hold of our address. We were supposed to meet in town last week but she didn't show up. Was she very mad at me?"

"Not at all. She was in such a state that. . . ."

"Oh yes," Victor said hurriedly. "She takes everything too much to heart."

"Listen, Victor. . . ."

"But I told you, I do know Liza. We even had an affair."

"An affair? How come? You were in Leningrad."

"So was she. We were at the institute together.... You're going to Leningrad tonight, aren't you? Shall I push off to the station and book you a sleeper? Or would you like me to wire some of my friends and ask them to look up that address? The one mentioned in the message."

He picked up the sheet of paper.

"Put it back on the desk, Victor. And don't touch it. You say you had an affair. What d'you mean by that? Were you... er... very close?"

"Why, yes. At one time I even thought I was in love with her. But I got over that. I suppose she can't stand me now but I... I don't feel about her one way or another now. Well, a bit sorry for her, perhaps.... When I saw her just now she was quite like a stranger to me. You followed her out and I stood here reading this note and, really, I envied you terribly. You see, I've never met anyone about whom I could feel the way you feel...."

"Stop talking about me," Zavyalov snapped. He still nursed a faint hope that his worst suspicions were unfounded. "I want you to tell me everything about your relations with Liza. D'you hear? Everything."

Victor shrugged in resignation.

"All right, Vladimir Andreyevich. How can I have any secrets from you? I can imagine what she told you, seeing what a state she was in."

"I repeat, she told me nothing. I want to hear it all from you. Now d'you understand me?"

"Well, all right," Victor mused, "if you have to know. We met at the institute. At a literary evening. Some Moscow poets were reading their poems. Some of our Leningrad ones too. Then there was a discussion. I was one of those who spoke and when it was over Liza came up to me and told me how much she'd liked my speech—she said it had touched her heart. Something like that, anyway, I don't remember exactly."

Zavyalov watched him intently. He wasn't going to let Victor out of the room until he knew everything,

down to the smallest detail. He felt as if he were seeing him for the first time. Who was he, this young man, he asked himself. He couldn't find the answer. But he had to find it.

"What did you talk about that evening?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't remember exactly. I didn't like the poems. They were written during the period of all that lawlessness. They belonged to the time of the cult."

"I see," Zavyalov said. "So Liza liked your bold speech. Go on."

"Well, we went for a walk. Strolled about town till quite late. Then we started meeting regularly. And that's how it happened. Later she told me she believed she was pregnant."

"And what did you say to that?"

"What could I say? I'd found out by then that I wasn't really in love with her. I liked her, but it wasn't real love. That's why when you told me about your feelings for Olga..."

"Forget about my feelings and Olga," Zavyalov cut him short. He was finding it difficult to restrain his mounting anger. "I asked you what you said to Liza when she told you she was going to have a baby."

"I didn't say anything. Nothing definite, anyway. But after that we met less often."

"I see. The happy mother-to-be tells the father that she's expecting a baby. The father says 'nothing definite'. But, by a strange turn of events, they begin to 'meet less often'. Go on, please."

"What is this, an interrogation?"

"Nothing of the sort. We're simply having an evening of questions and answers. It seems to me I have a right to know why the sight of my cousin should make a girl run as fast as her legs could carry her."

"But I've already told you it's all because she's oversensitive, she's too childishly vulnerable."

For a moment Zavyalov believed that Victor really didn't understand that he was in any way blameworthy.

"What was I supposed to do? Marry a girl I didn't love?"

"We'll talk about love later. What happened next, I'm asking you?"

"To me? Nothing. I was sure she'd understand and there wouldn't be a baby. Then we practically stopped meeting each other. People told me Liza was not getting on with her studies, missing lectures. . . ."

"Did you talk to her about it and try to help her?"

"Help her how? The only help she wanted from me was for me to marry her and agree to her having the child. But I. . . ."

"But you naturally didn't want that."

"Look here, Vladimir Andreyevich, drop the sarcasm," Victor suddenly flared up. "I realise you helped me during my studies, I'm living with you now, and consequently I have to answer your questions. But please don't try to make me out to be a monster. It's all much simpler. You're examining me like a fly under the microscope. But after all we see thousands of flies and never stop to wonder about them. Just flies. But when one of them comes under the microscope we see it has a head like a tiger's and hairy paws. . . . Tell me in a couple of words what it is you want of me."

"I want to know whether you recognise the most elementary moral standards. . . ."

"Ah, moral standards. I was only waiting for you to bring out those splendid words. Moral standards. All right, let's analyse that lofty conception. Two people are intimate for a time. They even love each other. Unfortunately, babies are born as a result. 'Unfortunately' in some cases, to be more precise. And so for the sake of your celebrated moral standards those people who've already grown indifferent to each other or, as is more often the case, when one has grown indifferent to the other—those people are forced to live together, linked by chains forged out of your moral standards."

"Chains!"

"Yes, chains. Why, these moral standards rob a person, a man or a woman, of the right to love someone else. Just let him try! And then, according to these so-

called standards, he'll be accused of immoral behaviour. Don't those words clang like links in an iron chain? Of course, you've read Tolstoi's *Living Corpse*. Didn't it ever occur to you that it can apply to our times as well?"

"Do you realise what you're saying?" Zavyalov interrupted him.

"I should say I do," said Victor with heat. "Just think, when we condemn a man because he has grown indifferent to his wife or, say, girl friend, we're mainly concerned about *her* sufferings. But no one bothers to picture those terrible months and years which lie ahead of him if he gets chained to her for the sake of your precious moral standards. And d'you know why? It's because you deny a man's right to inner freedom. Oh, I know what you're going to fling in my face now. You're going to tell me I'm preaching freedom for anarchists, philistines, for any son of a bitch. You'll tell me that next I'll claim the right to set fire to houses and murder people and God knows what. But, that would be sheer rhetoric, no more than a play of words. My inner freedom is no threat to society and I..."

"But what about the person you've deserted and hurt? And the child?"

"Why, d'you think no one suffers when your moral standards *are* observed?" retorted Victor. "But we shut our eyes to it because that suffering is, so to say, officially sanctioned. The feelings of a woman with the mentality of a property owner who wants to chain a man to her bed simply because they registered their marriage so many years before—oh, those feelings evoke a flood of tender emotions! The prigs and the hypocrites immediately bring out the rusty chains of 'moral standards' and carry them solemnly on outstretched hands. The forge is hot, the smith stands by with his hammer ready."

He went on and on, barely pausing for breath, gesticulating with his hands raised to the level of his face, clutching and unclutching his fingers convulsively.

For a moment Zavyalov saw him as a conjuror drawing an endless coloured ribbon from his mouth and touching it now and then with his fingers.

Why did he have to listen to all this? Why had he started this conversation? Why did he let this rascal put up a smoke screen to gain time and to collect his wits? He should have given him a good hiding at the very beginning and shaken some clear, straightforward answers out of his puny frame.

"But what about love?" he asked.

Victor stopped as though he had stumbled over some invisible obstacle.

"What about love?" he repeated, puzzled why a question so irrelevant had been introduced into the conversation.

"D'you think Liza was in love with you?"

"I suppose so. But what of it? I was in love with her too."

He spoke like a man who was being unjustly reproached for not repaying a debt.

"You evidently think you have the right to decide everything yourself and that others have only to reconcile themselves to your decisions. That's so, isn't it? What does it matter whether she still loves you or not if you're no longer in love with her. Do I follow you?"

"If you mean to shift everything to a purely emotional plane. . ." Victor began irritably.

"But love—that after all is the 'emotional plane', isn't it, Victor? Love means happiness and tears and agony, everything. Those are fine words—'emotional plane'. A real find for all those you are out to massacre. But what isn't on the emotional plane, I ask you? A human being—what plane is he on? Doesn't all his life consist of moments of joy or grief, of gusts of passion, of happiness, of disappointments? Oh, you great humanist! For you Liza's love is simply the 'emotional plane', but I see her genuine tears, her anguish. And you want to convince me that you live with a clear conscience! Why, you're not even a human being! You're simply

an automatic computing machine which has been programmed with fashionable terms. A pre-set computer."

"I realise," Victor said with a supercilious grin, "that you're listening to me with horror, that one suspicion after another is coming into your mind, that you're afraid I may really have political principles that you'd be obliged to brand and expose. Take it easy. I tell you once more, there's only one thing I want: to be left alone."

"What do you mean by 'left alone'?"

"Hm. . . . I want to keep my sense of inner freedom, if you want to know. I want to do what I like. And I don't want anyone to meddle in my life."

"I wonder what *does* an individual like you want?"

"Oh, nothing special. Evidently I'm going to do what I'm assigned to do. Build roads, seeing that's what I've been taught to do. But I don't want to be taken out of my state of inner freedom. I don't want to know anything in advance. Knowing in advance means you've already bound yourself. And I don't want to be bound either by rusty chains or by pink ribbons. A day came when I grew terrified that I might lose my inner freedom, that I might be turned into a draft animal. I knew then I'd have to break with Liza."

"What about the child?"

"The child?" Victor asked with surprise. "D'you mean to say she had a child?"

"You rotter. D'you mean to say you didn't know?"

"But . . . but honestly, I didn't know," Victor said, suddenly sounding alarmed. "Liza left Leningrad about five months ago. She had some unpleasantnesses there. She quarrelled with the assistant dean. She had to leave. So she did have the child?"

"You're a danger to society, Victor," Zavyalov said slowly. "You're a potential murderer."

"Really!"

"Shut up!"

Everything was clear to Zavyalov now. He had found the key to Victor's character. The key he'd been looking



for so hard and hadn't been able to find in his earlier talk with him.

He'd been ill-armed himself then. The old sense of injury had held him imprisoned. He had wanted to believe that Victor was attacking those same people who had deprived him, Zavyalov, of the right to fly. Victor's attack had indirectly justified Zavyalov himself, had to some extent affirmed the logic of the passive attitude he had adopted to life, his right to live "in second gear".

"Shut up and listen to me," he said. "You've been talking a lot about the difficult times we lived through. I have more reason than you to hate the things we all saw going on. For I didn't simply see them. I actually experienced them. For days I crawled through bogs and quagmires to get back to our lines. I was wounded, starving. There's a kind of fish which in the spawning season, wherever it happens to be, does everything it can to get back to the place where it was spawned. It travels hundreds of kilometres through deep and shallow water, over rapids and down waterfalls; it's impeded by the swift current, it loses its scales, becomes bruised and wounded. But as long as that fish has any life in it, it goes on trying to reach its goal. I was like that fish. I crawled and crawled to reach our side and I got there. And as a reward I was stripped of everything I held dear. Those people who forbade me to fly also made fine speeches about justice. But they acted against justice. They armed themselves with a theory that maintained an absurd principle—the further we advanced towards communism the stronger would be the resistance of our internal enemies. And now this is what I want to ask you, young man—how old are you, I forget, twenty-four?—is it worth while invoking conscience and justice merely to hide your own cruelty?"

"But I didn't even know, Vladimir Andreyevich," Victor said in an unexpectedly thin voice.

"Be quiet! It was you who told me the other day there were no dogmas, only situations and solutions. I asked you then where your compass was. You pointed

to your heart. But what if that heart is callous, if there is no honesty in it? What if you've got an automatic conscience, an obedient, well-trained conscience which always points to a solution that suits you? I'm also against prigs slicing through the intricate knots of human relations. But what were the complications that faced you? Who was trying to chain you with any rusty chains? Whom are you trying to deceive? After all, it was quite simple. A good, decent, loyal girl falls in love with you. She likes your talk about conscience and inner freedom. For her you become the personification of all the good things that now lie ahead of us, of everything connected with our future. She finds she's with child. You get scared. That happens. Even under communism there'll be cowards. At first I didn't understand what you were afraid of. Now I know. You were afraid of losing what you call your sense of inner freedom. But wouldn't it be nearer the truth if I called it the fear of responsibility? Responsibility for what? you'll ask me. For the fate of other people. In this case, for Liza's and your child's. You're against priggish administrators and Party secretaries meddling unceremoniously in people's personal affairs. You're against officialdom, are you? So am I. I'm with you when you spout against dogmatism, against hypocrites and prigs. But on what principles do you attack them? On the principle of genuine understanding? Of a true understanding of the human soul? No, you're for uncontrolled freedom to behave like a rotter, that's the point. That's why I'm against you. You stick to *your* conception of conscience and justice. Most people define the value and reality of those concepts by whether what they prompt you to do is of benefit to others. But for you those concepts have an independent existence. No one has any right to control how you put those concepts into practice. No one except you. That's the way you think. But, it seems, you're not a strict controller. You've made a lifelong deal with conscience and justice. You use them as weapons and proclaim them at every crossroads, but in practice. . . ."

"That's not true."

"It is true. Incidentally, hasn't it occurred to you that the best way of testing the soundness of your conscience is to ask yourself whether the action it prompts you to take is of benefit to others? But I've something more to say. Your girl friend goes away. She doesn't want to bind you. But, perhaps, she still believes in you. That is known as love, but you can call it conscience too. You wouldn't be wrong. Anyway, you drop Liza, you ignore her. . . ."

"No, that's not true," Victor said. "I simply tried to persuade her that we couldn't afford a child yet, that I wasn't in a position. . . ."

"You're lying. I'm sure you said nothing of the sort to her. You probably told her that if she got rid of the child everything would go on as before. As for the rest, you've just made it all up. You acted like a coward. Liza was suffering but you kept quiet. Your noble, irreproachable, uncompromising sense of justice fell silent when Liza's heart was breaking."

Zavyalov came right up to Victor and said:

"You're a murderer, young man. A common, foul, primitive murderer."

"No, no," Victor mumbled, recoiling. "How dare you call me that? It's not my fault that Liza decided to have the baby. After all, she knew we'd never get married. But, of course, I'll support the child, that goes without saying."

"No one is going to encroach on your freedom, Victor," Zavyalov said quietly. "There's no pay-off for you. The child is dead. Your son is dead."

"Dead!"

Victor's face paled. Drops of sweat stood out on his brow.

"You don't mean it."

"I do."

Zavyalov walked to the far end of the room. He felt he could not look at Victor any longer.

"When I was walking back," he said, "I was thinking that if my suspicions were confirmed I'd throw you

out. Give you a good hiding and kick you down the stairs. That's what I ought to do now. But I will not touch you. I find the idea repulsive. I'd hate to come into physical contact with your sticky, elastic conscience. And another thing. I intended to leave for Leningrad tonight, but now it's too late. I've missed the train. You wouldn't understand this but I couldn't leave before I knew the whole truth about Liza. Never mind, I'll go tomorrow. I'm going out for half an hour. When I get back I don't want to find you here. You've completed your education and I don't have to help you any more. That's all."

And he left without looking at Victor again.

### 13. PAVEL WILL FLY

“Comrade Prokhorova? Zavyalov here. I wanted to tell you how grateful I am. I’m leaving for Leningrad tonight.”

“Good. I wish you luck,” she said. “I’m not very pleased with myself, you know, I rather mismanaged things. The letter arrived late in the day, I tried to get you on the phone, but no one answered.”

Had Liza told her anything? He tried to guess from her voice how much she knew. No, her voice revealed nothing. She spoke in her usual level, dryish tone.

“I’d like to thank Liza once again,” he said. “Can I ring her up?”

“We have no telephone, don’t you remember? I’ll tell her. Well, good luck.”

In a moment she’d put down the receiver. She was busy. There were people waiting to see her.

“One more minute, please! If it’s not too much trouble, please tell Liza that I’ve got to talk to her.”

“Liza?” Prokhorova sounded puzzled.

So Liza had told her nothing. His request surprised her, to say the least. Why on earth should he want to talk to Liza?

He had to find a plausible pretext.

“You see,” he said. “Liza lived in Leningrad for a time, she told me last night. And I don’t know the town too well. . . .”

No, it sounded too stupid.

“Please tell her I’ll be at home all evening. I’m taking the express. . . . Would she please ring me up?”

A pause.

"All right, I'll tell her."

"It's very good of you," he said with relief. "Thanks once more. Goodbye."

He put down the receiver. Would Liza ring him up or not? Probably not. When her mother gave her his message she'd probably shrug and ask: Who did you say? Zavyalov? Still, she must realise that he wouldn't have bothered her mother to do this without good reason. She must realise that it had something to do with Victor, with what had happened last night. So what of it? Didn't she make it clear to him that she did not want to rake it up?

No, she would not ring him up. But he had to have a talk with her!

What for? To comfort her. What a silly word. What did it mean? Offering consolation with such trite phrases as "chin up", "every cloud has a silver lining", "time is the best healer", "you're so young" and "you have everything to look forward to".

No, not like that. How then? He did not know. All he knew was that he had to defeat her despair for her. He had to make her believe in that something which is an antidote against despair, the something that gives one vision and helps one to see not just the dusty city shrubs, the shrivelled grass and the dim artificial light of the street lamps, but also the free, open spaces beyond, and the road leading into the future.

He had to make her believe that truth and justice were not empty sounds, not the decoys Victor made them out to be.

Victor was already gone when Zavyalov got home.

He deserved to be thrown out. A common hypocrite who did vile things and used high-sounding words as a cover. No, it was not as simple as that. He was no good, of course, it stood to reason. But the whole trouble was that he seemed to be quite sincere when he spouted his pet phrases about honesty, freedom and justice, he was too raw to understand that actions

not suited to words could not but lead the way to baseness.

How could he convince Liza that honesty and justice did exist? That scoundrelly youngster, a coward in spirit, had first seduced her with his seekings for truth, and then ruined her life. How was he to convince Liza that it was not a rule, not an inevitability, but just her bad luck. It was painful and tragic, but it was no more than bad luck. . . .

Would she ring him up or not?

He still had eight hours to go. Prokhorova would finish work two hours from now. It would take her half an hour to get home. It would be three or four hours before Liza came or called him. They'd have plenty of time to talk.

Tomorrow morning he would see Olga.

He decided against sending her a telegram. It said in the letter that she lived there in 1950. That was six years ago. She may have moved to another address. And then another Kosichkin would answer that "No Mironova resides here". Tomorrow he'd find out everything himself. He had two days at his disposal—Saturday and Sunday.

Seven o'clock. No ring. Eight o'clock . . . nine. . . . Oh well, he might have expected it. Of course, he could go to her place. Krasin Street. . . . But one couldn't force oneself on people. Even with the best intentions.

The doorbell!

Zavyalov hurried to the hall.

Oh God, it was Pavel! The Pavel Shevlyagin who kept writing to him and pestering him at the airfield.

He stood outside the door, not daring to come in, and mumbled in embarrassment.

"I've no time just now, Pavel," Zavyalov told him sternly. "I'm going away. We'll have a talk when I come back."

He wanted to close the door. Dammit. Pavel had squeezed himself in, and though he still did not dare to cross the threshold, there was no closing the door.

"I'll only keep you a minute! I'll say my piece and go."

It was no use arguing.

"All right, come in," Zavyalov said. "I give you five minutes. Make it snappy, army style."

Pavel crossed the hall to the living room in two strides and stopped, looking about him.

"Have you no models of planes or anything?" he asked unexpectedly, running his eyes over the desk, the bookshelves and the walls.

"No, none. Well? Is that all you wanted to know?"

"No, of course not," Pavel said hastily. "I've come on business. Here."

Thrusting his hand into his pocket he produced a neatly folded newspaper and held it out to Zavyalov.

It was the *Stankostroitel*, the Proletarian Revolution Plant newspaper.

Zavyalov looked enquiringly at him, and then at the paper again.

"No, not here, it's on the inside page," Pavel said excitedly.

Ah, here it was, marked off with pencil.

"At a ceremony yesterday, the Komsomol Committee pennant was handed to the winning team of fitters from the mechanical shop. Team members Perepelkin, Chernov, Vasyutin, Shevlyagin and. . ."

"Well done, Pavel!" Zavyalov said.

Pavel stood in the middle of the room. A funny-looking chap. An undersized eighteen.

"I didn't come here to brag," he said, staring at his toes. "I came to ask, will they admit me now?"

"The flying club again? But what has this got to do with it?"

"You haven't read it to the end, have you?" Pavel asked, frowning.

Zavyalov read on:

". . . Shevlyagin and Andreyev have promised to work in the Communist way . . . to be models of behaviour . . . to improve their qualifications and raise their cultural level. . . What is more, Pavel Shevlyagin has promised



to complete a course of study at the flying club in his spare time and qualify as a pilot. . . ."

Zavyalov burst out laughing. What a chap! If this wasn't a clever move!

"What's so funny?" Pavel asked glumly.

"You're too cunning by half, fellow," Zavyalov said, choking with laughter. "What a smart trick! Must you keep your promise? Definitely. And they won't let you. Not let a shock-worker of socialist labour keep his promise? Who'd dare do that? Not a bad idea at all!"

"So you think it was a dirty trick?" Pavel said in a hurt tone. "You think I kept it from the fellows that I was refused admittance to the club? They know all about it. And anyway, how did I put it? I said 'I promise'. It means that I promise to get admitted. See?"

Zavyalov felt slightly ashamed of himself for guffawing so tactlessly.

"I'm sorry, old chap, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You must go to the District Military Commissariat. . . ."

"I've been there!" Pavel broke in exasperatedly. "I went there four times, you know that. They're suggesting that I take a truck driver's course. Of all things!"

"Unfortunately, Pavel, you can't circumvent the Military Commissariat. It just can't be done," Zavyalov spoke soothingly.

"What d'you mean it can't be done?" Pavel objected heatedly. "That's what the chaps in our team used to say. It can't be done, they said, overfulfilling the plan, studying nights, coaching those who can't keep the pace, never taking a drink, and answering for things that have nothing to do with you. But then we decided that it could be done!"

He had the stance of a fighter: one foot forward, fists clenched. And he spoke with the passion of conviction.

And suddenly Zavyalov thought: what a difference between this small, bristling character and Victor, who was only slightly older, just another boy actually. It

was only last night that Victor had stood there, exactly where Pavel was standing now, and talked.

He had a right to freedom, he had maintained. The right not to know what he would do tomorrow. The right to cast off the burden of duty and responsibility.

And this Pavel chap was taking on such a load that it was a wonder he did not stagger under it. It would be curious to bring them together. . . .

However, the meaning of Victor's subtle philosophy would simply be lost on Pavel. They'd be speaking different tongues. A toad and a young eagle. No, he was wrong, Victor was not a toad. If he were, everything would be much simpler. He fancied he was as free as a bird. He was more like a film actor in a composite shooting: he appears to be soaring in the air, or driving a car at break-neck speed, or leaping across an abyss, but all the time he is standing on a soap box and waving his arms about. Or sitting in a parked car and frenziedly turning the wheel. Or jumping from one property cliff, half a metre high, to another.

But then not everyone by far knows the secrets of composite photography. . . .

"God damn it! This boy *will* fly," Zavyalov said to himself with sudden determination. "It's boys like him who should be given free run of the sky. I'll do everything to get him admitted. I'll go to the Military Commissariat. Enrolment is not until autumn, there's plenty of time. He will be a pilot, he will fly, and let that Victor crawl on the ground until someone takes him by the scruff of the neck, gives him a good shaking, and makes him walk upright like a man. But Pavel will fly. I'll see that he does, if it's the last thing I do!"

"Very well," he said to Pavel. "I'll write a letter to the Military Commissariat. You're right: there's a new argument in your favour."

"You will write?" Pavel exclaimed, his hopes soaring and the freckles on his nose standing out brighter than ever. "Why, it's in the bag! They'll never dare refuse you. You, a wartime flier!"

"I was a flier, I'm not one now."

"Not on your life! A flier, that's something you are till the end of your days!"

Zavyalov repeated the words to himself. Then he sat down and began to write.

"To the District Military Commissariat.

"I have often had occasion to speak with Pavel Shevlyagin, and it is my considered opinion that there is every reason to admit him to the flying club. We need boys like him. We must, in the shortest possible time, rear a new generation of courageous people, devoted to our common cause, because of that outcrop of windbags we have now, who resort to high-sounding talk as a screen for their utter uselessness. We need strong, courageous people with a clear-cut aim in life. We must help them to get up into the sky as soon as possible so they can see the vista unfolding before them, because from below they cannot always see it clearly.... We must help them up and set them on the road...."

He read over the lines, smiled, tore up the page and began anew.

"To the District Military Commissariat.

"I beg to recommend P. N. Shevlyagin for admittance to the Moscow Flying Club. I am convinced that he will make a good pilot and will prove his devotion to our cause.

"Major (Air Force) V. Zavyalov  
(reserve), Senior Instructor of the  
Moscow Flying Club."

As he signed the letter, he suddenly realised that it was the first time that he had written the word "reserve" without any bitterness or sense of injury.

"Here you are," he said, handing the letter to Pavel. "If this doesn't help, I'll go and see them myself. I'll go as soon as I come back from Leningrad."

"Gosh!" Pavel exclaimed, reading the letter. "It's in the bag now, as sure as sure. Tell me, Comrade Zavyalov," he asked suddenly, "will it be long before the first space flights are made?"

"Not very, I imagine."

"Will spacemen be picked from among pilots? They'll want small men, won't they, not very tall ones, I mean. The spaceship won't be very big to begin with, will it? What do you think?"

"I think you're right."

"You see! Tell me, they say people will fly to the stars..."

"We'll talk about it when I come back, Pavel. I have to pack and catch a train."

Zavyalov put his hand on the boy's shoulder and slowly walked to the door with him.

"I read the other day that some stars aren't there any more: they disappeared millions of years ago, but their light still reaches us," Pavel chatted on. "Is it true?"

"Yes, Pavel, it's true."

"But what if people should fly to one of those stars? They'd waste all that time, and then they'd discover that the star is no more, vanished ages ago..."

"They'll see new stars."

"But what if it takes, say, a thousand years to reach that star, what then?" Pavel continued, already standing in the open door. "You can't do it in a lifetime, can you?"

"You can, Pavel, don't worry. You can do a lot in a lifetime. Anything. Goodbye now. I'll see you when I get back."

He was gone. What a nice boy he was.

No word from Liza. Ten o'clock. Time to go.

He packed his things. Just a small suitcase. A couple of shirts, socks, a towel, soap, a toothbrush. What else? He took the photograph from his desk and put it carefully between the two shirts.

Now he was ready. He made sure the ticket was in his pocket. Time to go.

#### 14. HERE IS THE STREET...

**Z**avyalov paid the taxi-driver and looked about him. The wide Malo-Okhtinsky Prospekt was lined with tall buildings, all looking remarkably alike.

There were many entrances to No. 14, each with a long black board over it listing the apartments.

Zavyalov found No. 8. Suddenly he felt deadly tired. He did not know why. True, he hadn't been able to sleep all night. After standing for a long time in the corridor, he had gone into his compartment, climbed up to the top berth and lain there sleepless until the train attendant had tapped on the door and announced that they were approaching Leningrad.

Still he did not know how tired he was until he saw that No. 8. His legs were like lead, and he felt hot all over.

So he was there. At last.

The lift was clanking somewhere at the top of the shaft. He did not wait for it and started up the stairs.

Flat No. 8.

He was quite done in. He'd never felt like this before, not even after the most difficult and dangerous flights.

He leaned against the banisters, his eyes fixed on the black bell button to the right of the door. He glanced at his watch. Twenty past eight. If Olga was there, behind that door, she would probably be getting ready to leave for work. Perhaps she was only just getting up—many offices didn't start work till ten.

Suddenly he was in a panic. His first impulse was to rush down the stairs before the door opened. The

suspicious Simonyuk had tried so hard to plant in his mind, the fears and thoughts he wanted to drive away, now took possession of him.

He still saw Olga as the 17-year-old girl in that garden on the bank of the Volga, or as the girl flier at that airfield at the front.

He couldn't imagine her in an ordinary flat, living among people of today. His memory connected her with his past, with everything that was most precious and brightest in it. And now he stood before an ordinary door behind which lived a real, flesh-and-blood Olga. And that terrified him. Simonyuk's warning rang in his ears again.

He realised that unless he rang the bell at once he would flee downstairs. He gave the black bell button a hard, savage push as though he were squeezing the button of a machine-gun.

He heard the lock click. The door opened. In the half-light of the hall he made out the figure of a middle-aged woman wearing a floral-patterned housecoat.

"Who do you want?"

"Mironova. Does Olga Alexeyevna Mironova live here?"

"You've made a mistake," the woman said grumpily, drawing her housecoat around her more closely.

She was about to shut the door.

"Please, just one moment," Zavyalov said hastily. "I've come specially from Moscow.... Isn't this house number fourteen?"

"What flat are you looking for?"

"Number eight."

"Well, this is number eight. But there's no Mironova here."

"But...but perhaps her name isn't Mironova now," Zavyalov said desperately. "I want Olga Alexeyevna. D'you understand? Olga Alexeyevna."

The woman was evidently impressed by the despair in the voice of this strange man.

"Comrade, I've already told you that there's no one called Mironova or Olga Alexeyevna living here," she

said in a slow didactic manner. "This is the Lazareviches' flat."

"Oh . . . I'll only keep you a minute. I have it in writing that the person I'm looking for lives here. Perhaps she has moved. You must know who lived here before. In nineteen fifty she. . ."

"What year?"

"Nineteen fifty. I have an official note that she lived here, in this flat."

"What are you talking about? This house wasn't here in nineteen fifty, it was built only a year ago."

"A year ago!"

Zavvalov sounded so disappointed that the woman softened.

"Come in," she said. "What are we standing on the doorstep for?"

He stepped inside. The woman closed the door and switched on the light.

"All the houses in this street are new," she said. "They've all been built in the last three years."

Zavvalov finally came to his senses. His mind began to work with its usual precision.

"Tell me, did number fourteen stand here before this house was built?" he asked.

"I really couldn't say. We used to live the other side of town, in Ligovskaya Street. Four in a room. We were cooped up like that for thirty years. But now look. . ."

She smiled. Evidently she still found it difficult to suppress her excitement when talking about her new flat.

"Come in, come in," she said. "Take a look round. Two rooms, a bathroom, a kitchen with Finnish fittings. . ."

"Thank you, but I'm in a terrible hurry. So you don't know where the old number fourteen stood. Who could tell me?"

"I haven't the slightest notion," the woman said after a moment's reflection. "Perhaps the house-manager's office would know. It's downstairs, on the ground floor, to the right of the front door, as you go down."

"Thank you, and forgive me for being a nuisance."

What bad luck the old house has been demolished...."

"Bad luck, you say?" the woman exclaimed indignantly. "D'you know the state those houses were in? Ramshackle old buildings. And now, well, look!"

"Oh no, I don't mean that. Of course, it's a good thing they built new houses. Very good. Much better for you too. It's a very nice flat."

He had no better luck at the house-manager's office—nobody there knew where the old number fourteen had stood. They advised him to enquire at the district Soviet. There he would be able to consult the old maps. And they probably kept a list of the tenants who'd been moved, with their new addresses.

But he decided he wouldn't go to the district Soviet. He'd first try the military commissariat where Olga had received her decoration.

For a few minutes he stood on the pavement looking along the receding façades of the new buildings. They were fine houses. Too monotonous, though. However, that woman probably didn't think so, nor did the other thousands of people who'd moved into new flats. At the moment they were revelling in their improved living conditions. They'd start noticing the monotonous architecture later on when the first flush of excitement was over. People soon get used to good things.

Six years ago Olga had lived here. She'd walked along this very street. Actually, she hadn't. In those days the street, like the houses and the people in them and everything else, had probably been quite different.

There was an enquiry kiosk on the street corner. Why shouldn't he try and find out Olga's address in the simplest way?

He walked to the kiosk and looked in. A girl wearing garish plastic earrings was reading a copy of *l'Humanité*. A French-Russian dictionary lay open on the table beside her.

"I want to trace an address," he said.

The girl's hand made two semicircles in the air. She laid a small printed form on the window-sill.



"Full name. Place and date of birth. District of residence in Leningrad."

"How long will I have to wait for an answer?" Zavyalov asked. "An hour? Even less, you say? Fine. May I ring you? Thanks."

He made a note of the telephone number.

It took him about an hour to reach the military commissariat.

In the vestibule he dropped a coin into a public telephone and dialed the number of the enquiry kiosk.

"I made an enquiry," he said. "About an hour ago. Mironova, Olga Alexeyevna. . ."

There was a brief silence.

"Yes, we've traced the address," the girl answered. "I'll give it to you. Take it down. . ."

"Just a moment while I find my pencil. Right, go ahead, please."

"Mironova, Olga Alexeyevna, date of birth 1924, address Apartment 8, 14 Malo-Okhtinsky Prospekt. Have you got it down? Have you got it down, I asked you? Why don't you reply? . . ."

## 15. I WON'T FORGET ANYTHING

**H**ere was the house. An old three-storey mansion whose appearance raised doubts in Zavyalov's mind. There were iron railings, but the gate was wide open and there were no signs of any security precautions. He could see the front door from the street. There was no guard or sentry in front of it. Just an ordinary front door. The upper half was glazed. However, he saw no inside curtain over it. Had it not been for the reflection of the sunlight on the glass he would have been able to see what was going on inside.

It hadn't been easy to get this address. At the military commissariat they quite readily told him that Olga Mironova's home address was: Apartment 8, 14 Malo-Okhtinsky. But when he asked where she was working when the decoration was conferred on her there was a hitch. After a long parley the junior lieutenant to whom Zavyalov had addressed himself told him he couldn't reply unless he got special permission from the military commissar.

Zavyalov had to wait his turn to see the military commissar and then use all his eloquence and produce all his papers in order to persuade the lieutenant-colonel to give him the information. Finally he got the address he needed: 81 Kirov Prospekt. He was asked not to put anything on paper. He was simply given the address and the cryptic name of the organisation: NII-24.\*

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\* An abbreviation for Scientific Research Institute.—*Ed.*

He had had to go right across Leningrad to get there. Here was the house at last. Several people went in. Others came out. Nobody going in whipped out a pass, and nobody coming out appeared to be thrusting the pass he had just shown to the sentry, back into his inside coat pocket.

There was no sign on the iron palings of the gate. A small shiny black signboard was affixed to the building, to the right of the front door. Zavyalov walked through the gate and came right up to the door to see what it said. CHEMICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE. All correct. No mystery here. No ciphers. Was it the wrong place? No, no mistake. It was definitely 81 Kirov Prospekt.

Still, appearances could be deceptive. He remembered the inside of similar ordinary-looking houses. No sentry boxes and no sentries. Well-kept handkerchief lawns in front. A street sign prohibiting parking. And inside—an icy silence, a man in uniform posted to the right of the door beside a small table on which samples of passes were kept under glass, and a sentry standing on a square felt mat to the left.

He opened the door and went in.

He found himself in a small vestibule with a tiled floor, high windows and a broad marble staircase. There was not a soul in sight.

Zavyalov started slowly up the stairs. He reached the first landing. To the left ran a broad corridor. Walking along it unhurriedly was a shortish man wearing spectacles. In his hand he held a sandwich wrapped in paper and was chewing vigorously.

"I beg your pardon. . ." said Zavyalov.

The man was so startled that he swallowed the wrong way. Zavyalov waited patiently until he stopped coughing.

"Please, where can I enquire about one of your staff? Her name is Mironova."

The man made a vague gesture with the hand that held the sandwich.

"Mironova? From the first lab?"

"Quite possibly. Unfortunately I don't know for certain."

"Yes, I think she works in the first lab," the man said, looking longingly at his sandwich.

"Yes, yes, that's quite likely," Zavyalov said impatiently. "All I know is that she works in your institute."

The man took a big bite and, chewing, said indistinctly:

"Well, why don't you go to the lab? First door on the right." He nodded towards the door, waved his hand in farewell and continued on his way.

Zavyalov leaned against the wall and stared hard at the door. Now he would take a step and open it. . . .

The big room was flooded with light. There were long rows of narrow tables with batteries of retorts, racks of test tubes and spirals of glass tubes on them. Several girls in white smocks were sitting at these tables. The one nearest the door looked up when Zavyalov walked in.

"Excuse me," he asked, his throat suddenly feeling constricted. "Does Mironova work here?"

"She's gone out," the girl replied. The others turned their heads towards Zavyalov as if at a command.

"Is she coming back?" he asked, feeling the blood hammering in his temples.

"Of course," the girl said with faint irony. "She went upstairs. She'll be back in a moment. Why, what's the matter?"

He must have swayed. Strange, he hadn't noticed it. All he had felt was a slight dizziness.

"I haven't seen her for nearly thirteen years," he said hoarsely. "I didn't know she was alive."

Now all the girls stopped working. They crowded round him and looked at him with sympathy.

"I say, let's give her a surprise!" one of them cried. "Quick! Come with me. Come over here."

She pulled Zavyalov by the hand to a cubicle separated from the big room by a thin plywood partition. Zavyalov stood close to the half-open door.

A minute passed, two, three. He heard the lab door open and a girl say in a loud voice:

"Listen, do you believe in miracles? We're going to show you a real miracle. One . . . two. . . ."

The cubicle door opened. The girl who had put Zavyalov there stuck in her arm and almost dragged him out.

There was a moment's silence. Everyone turned and looked at a rather stout and far-from-young woman standing a few paces from the door.

"Well!" a high, impatient voice rang out. "Here's Mironova. Look who's come to see you, Yekaterina Maximovna."

The woman shrugged her shoulders perplexedly.

"Do you want to see me, Comrade?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," Zavyalov said in a dull voice. "It's a mistake."

He suddenly felt quite calm, dully, indifferently calm.

"I'm looking for another Mironova. Olga Alexeyevna Mironova."

"Who does she work with?" one of the girls asked.

"How should I know?" he snapped and changed his tone at once afraid that his chagrin might be mistaken for rudeness. "All I know is that she works, or perhaps used to work here, in Institute Number Twenty-Four."

"Where?" the girls asked in unison.

"Here, in your institute."

"But that's an entirely different institute," one of them said.

"Different?"

"Why, of course. That inst . . . that organisation you mentioned hasn't been here since. . . . Listen, Vera, you know when they left, don't you?"

The girl called Vera frowned and shook her head.

The lab was silent. Suddenly all the girls became terribly busy. No one paid any more attention to Zavyalov. He might not have been there.

"Comrades," he addressed the room in general. There was a note of entreaty and misery in his voice. "Please help me. I'm searching for someone. At last I've found

this address: 81 Kirov Prospekt. Institute 24. That's correct, isn't it?"

"That institute isn't here any longer," said the woman called Mironova, the other Mironova. "It was moved elsewhere some years ago."

"But where is it now?"

Silence. Then the girl nearest to him said:

"I'm sorry, but we're very busy. You'd better ask the personnel department. Along the corridor on the right. The last door."

In the small room occupied by the personnel department Zavyalov found an old man wearing a tussler jacket with a medal ribbon pinned to the lapel. Zavyalov explained everything to him—who he was, why he was looking for Mironova, how he had learned of this address—if only to avoid a repetition of the questions which were beginning to drive him crazy. The old man listened to him without interruption.

"Sit down," he said in a calm, gentle voice. "Let's see if we can help you."

Zavyalov heaved a sigh of relief and sat down.

"Well now," the old man said unhurriedly. "This seems to be the situation. According to your information this girl worked in NII-24. However, that institute is no longer here. They were NII, and we're NII too. But we're a different NII. See what I mean? Same thing only different," he added with a smile.

"I know all that," said Zavyalov, his voice rising with his fear of drawing a blank again. "But what I'm interested in is where the NII I'm looking for is now. The other NII, d'you understand?"

The old man shook his head.

"You mentioned you'd been many years in the army," he said with a hint of reproach, "yet you ask me questions like that."

Zavyalov stood up abruptly.

"Is that all you have to tell me?" he said bitterly. "Is that all?"

"No, it isn't," the old man said with a grin. "Perhaps I can be of some assistance to you."

He picked up the telephone and gave a number to the switchboard.

"Arsenty Pavlovich? Would you mind very much coming down to my office just now?" He spoke as old men do, in a leisurely conversational manner. "It's only ten minutes to the lunch break so you'll be passing by anyway..."

He replaced the receiver as gingerly as though it were made of the finest glass.

"Arsenty Pavlovich Sokolov is in charge of one of the laboratories," he explained to Zavyalov who had listened to the short telephone conversation with strained attention. "He's a very nice person, an excellent scientist..."

"But... but how can he help me?"

"That remains to be seen." The old man shrugged and again a kind, faintly mischievous smile flitted across his face. "He worked in that institute, and perhaps..."

A short elderly man in a somewhat creased blue suit looked in at the door.

"Come in, come in, Arsenty Pavlovich," the old man said, half-rising. "This comrade," he made a gesture in Zavyalov's direction, "is very anxious to meet you."

The newcomer searched Zavyalov's face for a few seconds, trying to recall if he had met him before somewhere.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Did you work in NII-24?" Zavyalov went straight to the point.

"H'm. Let's assume so."

"Tell me, please, do you remember a comrade Mironova? Olga Alexeyevna Mironova."

"Good heavens, of course, I do!" Sokolov exclaimed.

Everything swam before Zavyalov's eyes. Sokolov knew her, he knew her! He was the first person he'd found in all his fruitless search who had seen her since the war. Zavyalov could not control himself. Everything had turned out to be true. This was no speechless photo-

graph, no dry typewritten paragraph but a living person telling him that she was alive.

Without realising what he was doing he grasped Sokolov's hand, shook it and squeezed it with all his strength.

"You know her, you know her, you know her," he said again and again.

His violent excitement conveyed itself to Sokolov.

"Has something happened to her?" he asked in alarm, gripping Zavyalov's hand. "Nothing bad? Is she all right?"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Zavyalov, not catching the drift of his questions. His words poured out in a torrent. "Everything's all right, everything's all right. I've found her. She's alive. It's true. Let's go to her now, this minute, let's hurry!"

"But where?" Sokolov asked in perplexity.

Zavyalov let go his hand. What had the man said?

"Is she in Leningrad? Has she come back?" Sokolov went on. "D'you know her address?"

"Her address?" Zavyalov echoed.

He had the sensation of having run hard up against a brick wall.

"You mean you don't know where she is?" he said in despair.

"Of course, I don't," Sokolov said. "I've not seen her for two, no, almost three years. Excuse me, but who are you?" he asked with undisguised puzzlement.

Zavyalov made a gesture of hopelessness. What was the use?

"Comrade Zavyalov hasn't seen Mironova since the war," the old man told Sokolov. "He thought she was dead, killed in action. Now he's found out that she's alive and is looking everywhere for her. . . ."

"Oh, I see now," said Sokolov and, turning to Zavyalov, asked him: "You haven't seen her since the war? Not once?"

"Not once," Zavyalov replied quietly.

"Well then, come along with me. I'll tell you all I know." He touched Zavyalov lightly on the arm.



"...I met Olga Mironova for the first time eight years ago. A general I knew rang me up and asked whether I could make use of a competent girl with a good record—a trained chemist. He mentioned her good record because the institute that used to occupy this building was of a quite different category. I'm not giving away any secrets by telling you this, especially since the institute I'm referring to was detached from ours and transferred somewhere else a few years ago. I don't even know whether it still exists.... In short, we were engaged in research on aviation fuel.

"So this girl arrived. I recall the day as clearly as if it were yesterday. She was rather thin, simply dressed, with a map-case slung over her shoulder instead of a handbag. She opened the map-case and produced her letter of appointment. I read it. 'Mironova Olga Alexeyevna,' it said, 'a graduate of the fuel department of the chemical technical school, is assigned...' and so on.

"I asked her a few questions as a matter of routine, or custom rather.

"So you want to work in the chemical industry?"

"She shrugged.

"Is chemistry a sort of hobby with you?"

"I studied it..." she answered vaguely.

"What appeals to you most in chemistry?"

"I couldn't tell exactly...."

"Frankly, I didn't like her answers much. She might have pretended at least that she was interested in the job she was applying for.

"In which department would you like to work?"

"Wherever you put me."

"My glance fell on her map-case.

"What about the aircraft department?" It was a random shot, you know.

"What did you say?" she gasped. She looked so radiant that I knew at once: I had hit the bull's eye, so to speak. True, the general had mentioned it to me in passing that the girl had been a front-line fighter, but I had no idea that it was in the Air Force,

" 'Well then,' I said. 'You'll do no flying here, of course, but you'll be directly connected with aviation. Incidentally, did you do any flying during the war?'

" 'I did.'

" 'What planes?'

" 'The ILs. I served in an attack bombers' regiment.'

" 'Fine, I thought, I'll show you what aviation is. I took her to the experiment lab. She stopped just inside the room and stood there, spellbound, staring at the huge motors. . . . The spectacle does impress, you know. The web of glass tubing, the coloured lamps flaring up, the automatic devices tracing curves, the motors humming and roaring. . . . In short, it's almost like being inside a plane. . . . I'm sorry, but what is your profession?'

" 'I'm a pilot.'

" 'Oh, I see! I shouldn't have given you all that stuff then,' Sokolov said in embarrassment. " 'You will remember, of course, that aviation was being rearmed in those days. New, jet planes were coming in. Well anyway, I explained to Mironova that the age of ILs was past, and the thing now was jet planes. I let my imagination run away with me a little when I told her that before long giant planes would be able to cover the distance from Moscow to Vladivostok in a matter of hours. These planes, I said, would need a new fuel for long flights at high speeds and altitude. I don't have to tell you this. As I spoke I watched her closely. Olga Mironova was changing before my very eyes. She had been one person, and now she was another: her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were wide open in wonder, her head was thrown back a little with a sort of challenge, and she looked prettier still. This was a different girl. A spark had been kindled in her, I could feel it, and I decided to fan the spark into a flame. I told her about the revolution in fuel which we had to make, and how badly we needed people who were familiar with motors, who had been in aviation and liked it. . . . D'you know, even as I spoke to her that first time I saw very clearly what sort of person she

was. I have often met her kind. They must have a purpose in life. They have to pursue a definite aim and not simply believe in something. Never mind the difficulties. If the aim is there, they can live. They're proof against anything then. Nothing will get them down, neither cold, hunger, nor grief. But all is over for them if the aim is no longer there to pursue. A gust of wind, in which ordinary people just bend a little, will break them. Some people can go on existing in a state of anabiosis after being struck by one of life's severe frosts: they are not really alive, but they have not died. . . . But people like Olga are killed outright. That is, of course, if their aim is gone. If they still have it, they can weather anything. Well then, I put Olga in the experimental group. The work involved determining the physical properties of the fuel. She made a start. Within two months she'd become the most popular person there. I must tell you I simply doted on her. I had some wonderful people in my lab, splendid specialists too. Heaven knows, I've seen a good many in my sixty odd years. . . ."

After a pause, he resumed: "I trusted her. As my assistant and as a person. You know there are people who, how shall I put it, exhibit a sham sort of honesty for all to see. They put it to work like . . . well, like a Geiger counter or something. Try doing something wrong in their presence—not doing, just thinking is enough—and the clicking will start right away: click-click-click-click. The so-called conscientiousness of theirs is developed to an art, a profession. Sometimes you have a Geiger counter like that working beside you and just waiting for a pretext to accuse you of something in honour's name. You start wanting to do something really outrageous just to spite it, or to give it a charge so big that it will choke and break down from strain and indignation. Now Olga, she was not like that at all. She did not make a show of her honesty or thrust it at you. At that time the atmosphere in our institute was tense. It was natural enough and easy to explain, and you being in the Air Force will appreciate

how top secret were the problems we were working on then. All of us knew how important secrecy was. But what made the atmosphere so tense was not the weight of our responsibility, nor the need to watch our step all the time—vigilance was a reflex developed in our staff to the extreme. It was something else. It was the feeling that we were being watched day and night by mean, suspicious, watchful eyes. Someone was dead certain, it seemed, that if the eyes were to close for one brief second we'd immediately grow slack, forget about security and start giving away state secrets. . . .

"Oh well, it's easy talking about it now. . . . But even in that strained atmosphere Olga managed to remain excitingly cheerful and candid. As head of the lab I knew that she wasn't too popular with people like the personnel department. Actually, she wasn't easy for them to get at, she had a splendid war record—combat duty, decorations and everything. And still. . . . I even asked her once: 'Why are you always bickering with them, what started it?' 'The beer joke,' she answered. Everyone knows the joke now. At the front once, a general uttered some nonsense in a very, very quiet voice, and all his subordinates repeated the thing to one another in whispers as if it were a military secret of enormous importance. And then it turned out that the general had simply been hoarse from drinking some cold beer. Olga told me how the personnel department had called her in and asked her some silly questions in the same hushed 'top-secret' voice, loaded with implications, and how she had replied in a whisper and then told them the beer joke. 'Let it go, Olga,' I said to her. 'Don't get involved with them.' And she said: 'I can't help it. It's too ridiculous. Supposing you had some treasure at home, more precious to you than all the world's treasures. If you lost it your life would be finished. And suddenly you noticed that some strange character was watching you to see that you didn't carry the treasure off and sell it to a junk dealer. Silly, don't you think?'

"Only I needn't have been afraid for her. I should have been afraid for myself. I'll tell you all about it, because what matters here is not my predicament but the fight Olga put up to rescue me. It happened in 1952. Olga was given a sample of the new fuel to analyse. The whole institute was anxious to hear the results. Everyone knew that a plane stood ready and waiting for it at a certain aerodrome. Olga's conclusion was that the fuel was excellent. We went ahead then, prepared a large quantity of it and sent it off to the aerodrome."

Sokolov was becoming more and more agitated. He stopped speaking and only resumed when he had mastered his emotion.

"I remember it all so clearly. It was in the autumn of fifty-two. A warm, sunny, summery day. We knew the test flight was scheduled for ten o'clock that morning. At ten sharp on some aerodrome—we'd no idea where it was—a plane using our fuel would take off. The director of our institute had promised to telephone the lab the moment the result of the test was known. We were very excited, of course, and nervous too. Well, nervous isn't quite the word. Olga was composed, though. The only one of us. 'Everything will be all right,' she said, 'the fuel is excellent.' Eleven o'clock—no phone call. At half past eleven I rang up the director myself. His secretary replied. He'd gone to the aerodrome, she said. They'd sent for him. Twelve o'clock. Not a word. At half past the telephone rang. The director asked me to come up at once. What was the result, I asked him over the phone. He didn't reply—just hung up. I ran upstairs to his office. I didn't get beyond the waiting room. They were waiting for me there, two of them. . . . What I'm going to tell you now I learned later, much later. . . .

"The investigating officer sent for Olga. 'The aeroplane that used your fuel crashed three minutes after taking off,' he said to her. 'The test pilot was killed. You gave the report on that fuel. I have the document here in front of me. The security people of your insti-

tute describe you as self-opinionated and disaffected. It is my duty to arrest you on the spot. But I trust you. Your record is good. You can't be a saboteur. You've been led astray by someone. Name that person.'

"Olga told him that no one had led her astray and that she had full confidence in her conclusions.

"The investigating officer told her it was stupid of her to be so obstinate even if she did believe in her conclusions. After all, she'd been given only a small quantity of the fuel to test. How could she guarantee the quality of the whole consignment that had been delivered to the aerodrome? And *that* had been deliberately tampered with. It was an established fact. As a result the plane had caught fire during flight and the test pilot, an ex-A Force officer, had perished, leaving a mother, a wife, and a two-year-old child. . . .

"He knew how to touch Olga where she was most vulnerable. He described the grief of the bereaved family in moving detail. He told her that the test pilot had served on the same front as she during the war. . . .

"Olga repeated that she was quite certain about her conclusions and that she ruled out the possibility of there having been any violation of technical regulations in the preparation of the rest of the fuel.

"Then the investigating officer asked her: 'According to your instructions what should you have done if you weren't quite certain about the results of your first test?'

" 'I'd have insisted on making a second test,' she said.

" 'In what form would you have done this?' asked the investigating officer. 'In writing?'

" 'No, what for?' said Olga. 'I'd have simply told the chief of the laboratory that I wanted to repeat the test, and he would've told the synthetic fuel group to send me another sample.'

" 'Perhaps that is what you did?' asked the investigating officer. 'Perhaps you did ask and perhaps the chief of the laboratory didn't send you a second sample?'

" 'No, I didn't ask him.'

" 'Perhaps you've forgotten that you did,' the investigating officer insinuated. 'You reported to Sokolov on the results of your first test. You told him that on the whole they were satisfactory but that you wanted to double-check yourself. You knew that the fate, the life of a man, of a pilot was involved. And you asked him perhaps not very insistently, perhaps quite casually....'

" 'If I'd done that,' Olga demurred, 'I'd have been sent another sample right away. A shadow of doubt would be enough for Sokolov to take precautions.'

" 'Yes, it would,' the investigating officer said with a sarcastic smile, 'if he wasn't a saboteur and an enemy of the people.'

" Olga sprang to her feet but the investigating officer thumped the table and ordered her to sit down. He started reading a long document which said that Arsenty Pavlovich Sokolov—that is myself—who had concealed the fact that his second cousin had been sentenced in thirty-seven as an enemy of the people, was himself an enemy agent, enrolled at the beginning of the war, and that on his masters' orders he had deliberately prepared a quantity of low-grade fuel the use of which would inevitably lead to a catastrophe....

" After that the investigating officer made Olga sit at a desk, gave her writing paper and told her to write down an account of everything that had happened and to give me a suitable character....

" Much later I had an opportunity to read that statement," Sokolov went on. "It was very short—just one page. Olga had written that she had complete confidence in her conclusions, that in her opinion sabotage in the preparation of the fuel was excluded, and that she knew I was a loyal Soviet citizen. That, after the war, I had helped her to find an aim in life for which she was happy to work. She was sure it was all a tragic mistake. In her opinion, whatever caused the destruction of the aircraft and the death of the test pilot had nothing to do with the fuel at all.... That was when

the struggle between Olga and the investigating officer began. I was able to follow all the clashes in that struggle when, much later, I was shown the minutes of her interrogation....

"The investigating officer—not without grounds—threatened her with immediate arrest since she had been responsible for testing the fuel.

"Olga must have realised how perilous her position was. However, the officer didn't need her—an unknown lab assistant who'd served in the Air Force—as a defendant. As a witness, on the other hand, she was a real find. Imagine—a simple Russian woman, decorated in the war, appearing as a witness for the prosecution. But she refused the role.

"She saved my life. Her duel with the investigating officer dragged on for about six months. She was summoned to the Big House, sometimes every day. Then they'd leave her alone for a week or two. Then they'd send for her again and again. Each time she went into that dread office she had every reason to fear that this time they wouldn't let her out. But without her assent the investigating officer couldn't complete his case against me effectively. You see, he was 'a stickler for the law'. We know now that many of his colleagues got along very well without such respect for legality.... That nightmare ended in the spring of fifty-three. A new commission was formed to investigate the cause of the accident, and it turned out to be a fault in the engine. The fuel on which Olga had worked so conscientiously is now used by our jet planes. Imagine how easily the Gordian knot of slander was cut! But it was done so 'easily' only because there were people in the Party who said, at the risk of their lives: 'This can't go on.'"

Sokolov fell silent.

They were sitting on a bench in a little deserted garden behind the institute. The sound of the passing traffic was only just audible.

For some time neither man spoke.

"And what about later?" Zavyalov asked at last. "Did you see Olga again?"



Sokolov shook his head sadly.

"That's just the point. I didn't. When I was released I went straight to the institute. I learned there'd been a reorganisation and that there were now two institutes. The one working exclusively on the problems of rocket fuel has been moved out of Leningrad. Well, it's only natural—the tasks facing the country in that sphere are enormous. Olga left with that institute. And now I'd like to know something. You haven't asked me one very natural question."

"What's that?" said Zavyalov. The unexpectedness of the remark put him on his guard.

"Doesn't it surprise you that I'm telling you all this? After all, you're a complete stranger to me. Do you think it is just an old man's garrulity? No, don't interrupt. You see, I want to talk about it. And the knowledge that today we can speak quite frankly and call a spade a spade is very gratifying, it makes me feel young and strong. Can you understand that? And another thing. . . . I haven't seen Olga since that time. I don't know where she is now. But you will find her. I know you will. I'm sure of it. It was enough to see you in that room to know you'll find her. And when you do, please tell her that the man whom she. . . ." He couldn't go on. His eyes narrowed as if he were dazzled by the sun. The veins in his cheeks reddened. He looked away.

"I will," Zavyalov said, laying his hand lightly on Sokolov's arm. "I understand. I'll tell her. . . . I'll certainly tell her you remember her. I won't forget."

They rose to their feet.

"Where am I to go now?" Zavyalov said, as if to himself. "Whom shall I go and see? How am I to find that institute? I say," he turned to Sokolov, suddenly remembering something. "You mentioned a general who gave Olga a reference. Where is he? Do you know him?"

"Why, of course," Sokolov said. "His name is Osokin. General Ivan Fyodorovich Osokin. I haven't seen him

for a long time though. We used to meet on business, shall I say. He was connected with aviation and indirectly with our institute."

"Do you know his telephone number or where he's serving?"

"Sorry, I don't. I believe he's retired."

"I'll try to find him," Zavyalov said firmly. "Wherever he is, I'll find him. After all, looking for a general is not like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Good luck to you," Sokolov said. "And please. . ."

"Yes, I won't forget. Thank you."

"But what have you to thank me for?"

"For Olga. For what you've told me about her. I won't forget."

## 16. OSOKIN

“My name is Zavyalov. I spoke to you on the phone, and you said I may call.”

The man on the doorstep was tall, heavily built and grey-haired. He was wearing civilian breeches, no jacket, house shoes and a white shirt with an open collar.

“General Osokin? Ivan Fyodorovich Osokin?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

Zavyalov would have liked to save time by saying straight away: “I’ve come about Mironova, Olga Mironova. D’you know where she is now?” But instead, automatically springing to attention, he silently shook the hand that Osokin held out to him.

“Come in,” said Osokin. “Come in. The place is in a bit of a mess, I’m afraid.”

It certainly was. Bundles of books, tied with string, were stacked along the walls in the corridor. There was an open packing case full of shavings. The wallpaper showed a number of darker patches where pictures had hung till recently.

Zavyalov followed the general past some closed doors. Behind one of them someone was hammering. Why is he wasting my time, Zavyalov fumed. We could talk here in the corridor. I have only a few words to say. I’m searching for Olga Mironova. Do you know where she is?

Osokin led him into a large room, apparently his study. On the desk stood a model of a jet plane and a lamp with a green shade. The bookshelves were empty except for a few volumes on the top shelf. Piles of fold-

ers, tied up with twine, lay by the desk. There was a hook with dangling wires in the middle of the ceiling where the chandelier had hung. The sound of hammering came faintly from the other room.

"Look what a mess we're in. I'm sorry," Osokin said slowly. Spoken in that low, slightly husky voice, every word gained a special significance. "Here's a chair for you." He removed a bundle of books from a leather upholstered chair and put them on the floor.

Zavyalov sank into the armchair. It was deep and soft. Osokin sat down at the desk.

"Now then, what can I do for you?" Osokin said at last.

"Comrade General. . ." Zavyalov began.

"I'm no longer in the army," Osokin interrupted him quietly but, Zavyalov thought, with a touch of asperity. "Call me Ivan Fyodorovich, please. Well, what is it?"

"Do you know Olga Mironova?"

Zavyalov thought he saw Osokin's face cloud as he jerked his head back slightly and assumed a guarded look. But then he may only have imagined it.

"I know her," Osokin said calmly after a moment's pause. He looked closely at Zavyalov without uttering another word.

"The thing is that I'm trying to trace her whereabouts," Zavyalov said quickly. "I have the address of the institution where she worked six years ago. Only it is no longer there, it has been moved elsewhere. And there are new blocks of flats in the street where she used to live."

Osokin's scrutiny compelled Zavyalov to change his tone. He tried to speak almost unconcernedly, as if the matter did not mean very much to him. But the harder he tried, the more troubled he sounded.

"I got in touch with a man who used to work at that institute. He knows Olga Mironova well, but he hasn't heard of her since the institute moved. His name is Sokolov, he's a professor. He told me that it was you who gave her a reference for the job. And so I thought that maybe. . . ."

He felt ill at ease under the watchful, or perhaps even hostile gaze of this big grey-haired man.

"Was it after the war that you first met Olga Mironova?" Osokin asked.

"No. I knew her in the army. I too served in the Air Force. Then I learned of her death. But it was a mistake. She wasn't killed."

He fell silent. For a while Osokin said nothing either. Why don't you speak, why? Zavyalov wanted to shout at him.

"No, she wasn't killed," Osokin said at last. He spoke slowly and dropped his head.

Zavyalov waited. Osokin sat stock still, his heavy grey head resting on his hand. Then he asked abruptly:

"Name?"

"Name?" Zavyalov said in a puzzled voice. "Her name is Olga. You know that."

"No. Your name."

"Vladimir. . . ."

"Vladimir. . ." Osokin repeated. "Yes, of course, Vladimir. . . ."

Osokin raised his head and looked Zavyalov straight in the eyes again. Zavyalov had the impression that the man had returned in thought from some distant place. He seemed to have been absent for some seconds.

Osokin leaned back in his chair. When he spoke he was again calm and collected.

"No, she wasn't killed. Her aircraft caught fire but she managed to bale out. The squadron commander's report gave her as lost. But she survived, though suffering from burns and concussion. The infantry picked her up pretty soon. She was six months in hospital. After that she returned to her unit. . . ."

"Well, and then? What happened to her afterwards?" Zavyalov exclaimed. The words "suffering from burns and concussion" had given him a physical sensation of pain.

"Afterwards?" Osokin echoed. "Well, naturally she went on serving in her unit."

"Did she tell you about this after the war?"

"No, why? At that time I was serving in the political department of an air division. Her regiment belonged to that division, so naturally. . . ."

"But why didn't she write to me when she got back?"

"You were dead, Zavyalov," Osokin answered quietly.

"Dead? I was dead? Why, that's utter nonsense. I landed on enemy territory but I was there only a month, and then I got back to my unit."

"But during that month an article appeared in the newspaper with a vivid description of your death," said Osokin.

"What article? Where was it published?"

"I don't remember."

"Did Olga read it?"

"Of course."

For a moment their eyes met once more.

"Where is she now?" Zavyalov asked. "Is she here in Leningrad?"

"No. You said yourself that the institute has been moved from Leningrad. I don't know where it went."

He isn't speaking the truth, Zavyalov told himself. He knows, he knows. But he doesn't want to tell. And I don't want to brood on why he won't tell me where Olga is. I don't want to, I can't, I won't. But Osokin knows all right. How can I force him to tell me?

"D'you mean to say," Zavyalov asked, "she's never written to you, never come to Leningrad, never called on you?"

"Not once." Osokin's voice sounded bitter and sad.

"I don't believe it!" Zavyalov cried.

Osokin frowned and drummed his fingers on the desk. Then he said in a sharp tone—very much the general now: "I see no reason why you should doubt my words. I have already told you that I knew Olga Mironova during the war. After the war we never met again. Except once. In 1949 she looked me up in Leningrad and asked me to recommend her to that institute. She told me she'd completed her training as a chemist and that she particularly wanted to work at that institute.

I was still in the army then and I helped her. And that's all."

It was like an order of dismissal. Automatically Zavyalov rose to his feet. But his determination was stronger than the force of habit.

"I still don't believe you, Comrade General," he said. "You can shout your head off at me, throw me out of your house. But I don't believe you. You don't want to tell me the truth about your relations with Olga, you don't want to tell me where she is now. But I love her and you know it. She means everything to me. I'll find her wherever she is. She was only seventeen when we met. She was my first love and I was the first for her too. And I wasn't killed, General Osokin, I'm alive. I'm here and I'm telling you that I won't leave this room until you tell me her address. I don't know what there was between you and Olga in those days. But now you're an old man. I suppose you have a family. And I have no one. Only Olga. No one else. I was an officer too. Have you no kindness in you? Give me her address and I'll go."

He waited for Osokin's final word. He was certain that this tall, heavily built man knew everything about Olga but wouldn't talk. Zavyalov was prepared for the worst.

But Osokin said nothing. His lips remained tightly compressed. At last they parted. Now he would pronounce the verdict.

"Very well, then, listen to me," said Osokin. "I haven't got her address. I was speaking the truth. But . . . you say you haven't seen her for many years. Would you like me to tell you about her? About the Olga I knew? The Olga who came to the political department to complain to me about the doctors who wouldn't let her fly. Imagine—those perverse doctors had forbidden a twenty-two-year-old girl who'd been lying in hospital for six months with severe burns and concussion to pilot an attack plane! I know everything, Zavyalov. I know that you first met Olga on the Volga and then, just once more, at an aerodrome. She told me that—later.

She always kept with her that article which described how you were killed. She loved you, Zavyalov."

"And you? Did she love you?" Zavyalov asked bluntly.

The door opened suddenly and a small, rather frail woman stood on the threshold.

At her unexpected appearance Osokin started so violently that Zavyalov thought he must be frightened of something.

"I'm sorry, Vanya. I didn't know you had a visitor," the woman said. Though the light of the desk lamp did not fall on her face Zavyalov guessed from her voice that she was far from young.

"I'm busy, Vera," Osokin said in obvious confusion.

"I didn't know. I just wanted to ask you whether I could start taking the window curtains down. I'll wait. Excuse me," she said, addressing them both, and closed the door.

Osokin sat down.

"Did she love you?" Zavyalov repeated.

"No, she was not in love with me," replied Osokin very simply. He did not seem surprised by the question. "She probably felt sorry for me. After all, my family was 'under the Germans'. I was certain they were all dead. It was not until after the war that I found them. But it's about something else I want to talk to you, Zavyalov. You loved her. And she loved you. But did you really know her, your Olga?"

"Yes, I knew her."

"Let me go on. I know you met twice. That's enough to fall in love with each other. But it's not enough to get to know. . . ."

"We wrote."

"You wrote? Yes, of course. . . ."

Osokin walked slowly up and down the room. His tread was so heavy that each pace seemed to leave a deep imprint on the floor.

"She came to see me the day after she rejoined her unit," Osokin went on. "I was at my desk writing a report to the political department of the army.



Suddenly I heard a girl's voice: 'Comrade Colonel, may I come in?' She stood waiting at the dugout door. I told her to come in. But she went on standing there. She was probably feeling very nervous."

Osokin turned his eyes to the door as if seeing Olga standing there. Zavyalov too looked towards the door and suddenly his imagination conjured up a vision of Olga as he saw her that time, wearing her blue overalls, and with a smear of oil on one cheek. But she was looking at Osokin, she didn't notice Zavyalov. It was as though he wasn't there.

Osokin swung round sharply and resumed his pacing of the room. There was no Olga. No one stood at the door. It was shut tight. The right half of the door was covered with a dark-green curtain. The other curtain had already been taken down, revealing a bare cornice and a cord with metal rings.

"'Senior Sergeant Mironova,' she reported. As if I didn't know her name! The only girl in a combat crew. As if I'd never seen her picture in the divisional or the army newspaper. I congratulated her on her return and asked her how she felt. 'Everything's in order. I feel fine,' she said. She had a scar. Just here." He raised his hand to his right temple. "Like a sabre cut. She tried to hide it by pulling her cap forward but it showed. I noticed a big burn mark on her right wrist when she raised her hand to salute me, there at the door. 'I want to fly,' she said. I suggested she should first go for a fortnight to the army hospital. It was in the rear and we used it sometimes as a sort of convalescent home for pilots suffering from fatigue or not very serious wounds. I saw the way the scar at her temple reddened when I mentioned the hospital. She said—d'you know what she said? 'Comrade Colonel, may I have your permission to appeal to the chief of the army political department?'"

Osokin ran a hand through his shock of grey hair and said suddenly:

"Would you like some tea? I'll ask for some..." He rose and strode towards the door.

"No, no," Zavyalov said, alarmed that Osokin might interrupt his story.

But Osokin at once forgot about the tea. He was back in the past. He took a chair close to Zavyalov and went on.

"She even got as far as the commander of the front. Of course, they didn't let her fly. Our political department was five kilometres away from her regiment. One evening I drove there. I had to hold a meeting with the political staff of the regiment. But there was no real necessity for it. I know what you're thinking, Zavyalov. You're right. Yes, I drove over there to see her. I persuaded myself that it was my duty as a political officer to find out how she felt, how she was taking the rejection of her appeal. In a word," he said with a wry smile, "I went to check on the morale of a soldier. But that wasn't the real reason. I hadn't been able to get her out of my mind all those days. I kept seeing her small slim figure tightly belted at the waist. We only talked for about ten minutes that first time but I sensed something in her that captivated me. She had a certain frenzy, a readiness to overcome and crush everything in her path: rank, authority, logic, the army regulations, anything that blocked the way to her goal—to be allowed to fly again.

"I was an army pilot too, Zavyalov, a professional airman. I know what it means for a pilot to part with his craft. I've seen great hefty lads burst into tears when they were grounded. And this was a slip of a girl, who'd survived a terrible shock and who still bore the scars of her burns, insisting on her right to return to combat flight. She was possessed with a fighter's passion. I felt it was not simply a question of flying, or wanting to risk her life again. It was something quite different. I'd call it the will to live. No, not only that. Everyone wants to live. She had something else, something bigger—a readiness to live in top gear and look upon it as happiness. When the wind begins to blow and the rain lashes down, an ordinary person usually looks for shelter. But there are people who

enjoy defying the elements, plunging headlong against the storm, the wind and the rain, against the devil himself. That's what I felt Olga was like. And you, Zavyalov, did you sense that quality in her?"

"I . . . I don't know," Zavyalov replied under his breath. "I've never thought about it. For me she was Olga, just Olga. . . ."

"Well, to each his own. But I . . . no, I wasn't mistaken in her. She was just what I'd imagined her to be. You didn't know her, Zavyalov, not at all. 'Just Olga.' Why, it's laughable. She had the makings of a heroine. As a matter of fact, she was a heroine. But in those moments I didn't think of her feats in battle. It didn't occur to me to call in the reporters and order them to devote a whole page to her in the newspaper, which, in point of fact, was just what I ought to have done. I wanted to see her, to be near her. I felt happier, lighter at heart when I was with her. As I said, my family was in enemy-occupied territory. I was sure my wife and daughter were dead. To tell the truth I dreaded the day when, with the war over, there would be quiet again and I would not merely know but would really feel that everything was over for me, that there was no hope left and I was all alone. . . . Well, I went to see Olga. . . ."

Zavyalov listened to him in silence. Once again he saw the older man transformed before his eyes. Earlier, watching him pace the room with his heavy, measured steps, Zavyalov thought him a man of slow reflexes, lacking in feeling, a tank-like man. But now an invisible fire seemed to be glowing behind that broad shield of a chest.

Osokin dropped his head and said no more. But Zavyalov felt that in that sudden silence he was still seeing Olga before him. He saw her but he didn't want Zavyalov to see her too.

The hammering in the next room was resumed. The dull measured thuds echoed painfully in Zavyalov's ears.

"Well, go on, tell me more. Why have you suddenly stopped?"

His voice seemed to rouse Osokin. He lifted his head and looked at Zavyalov in bewilderment, as if wondering what that strange person was doing there.

"I've told you everything," he said, leaning back in his chair.

"What do you mean—everything?" Zavyalov burst out. "Ah, naturally, I see it now. What follows is something I'm not supposed to know. Honestly, Comrade General, do you think me so small-minded and stupidly jealous that I'd hold something like that against a woman who believed me dead and buried a long time ago?"

"Something like *that*?" Osokin repeated with a faint grimace of disgust.

"Forgive me, I didn't mean it that way."

"Forgive you?" Osokin again repeated Zavyalov's words. "What is there to forgive? And anyway what does it matter?"

"Then help me to find her!"

"Surely you don't think I'd withhold the address from you if I had it? I tell you again: I don't know where Olga is now. We parted in 1945. . . ."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. All right, I'll tell you that part of it too.

"In June 1945, immediately after the end of the war, I learned that my family was safe. No, it was Olga who learned it first. She wasn't absolutely certain but there was a faint ray of hope. She'd met a partisan from the place where my family was at the outbreak of the war. He told her that he'd heard from someone that the partisans had managed to smuggle my wife and daughter out. Olga told me the news the same evening. That was our last evening together. She made me give her my word of honour that I'd start the search at once. You asked me, Zavyalov, how we parted. Well, now you know."

There was a long silence.

"I heard nothing from her after that until forty-nine when she telephoned me. She asked me to help her get a job. I helped her. She didn't ring again."

"Not once?" Zavyalov asked in a low voice.

"Not once. Does it surprise you? After all, she has a heart, Zavyalov, a kind heart. Why should she torture me?"

Well, that seemed to be all. Zavyalov glanced at his watch. Ten to seven. He had been with the general nearly an hour. It was time to go. Osokin's wife was waiting to come in and take down the curtains. Where were they going? For politeness sake he ought to ask one or two conventional questions and then take his leave.

"Thank you for what you've told me, Comrade General," said Zavyalov, adopting a deliberately formal manner. "I dare not keep you any longer. Especially as I notice you're busy getting ready to move. Have you received a new appointment?"

"Yes."

"A division or a military district?"

"No, a job in the field of national economy. A state farm."

"In the allegorical sense, I suppose," said Zavyalov with a shrug.

"Allegorical? Hell, no. I've been appointed director of a state farm which I have to organise in Kazakhstan."

No, he was not joking, it seemed. Kazakhstan! The virgin lands. Yes, many people were going there these days. Young people, Komsomols. But this elderly lieutenant-general!

"I'm sorry," said Zavyalov, "but it's somehow hard to believe. What have you, a professional soldier, a general, to do with agriculture? Besides, at your age. . . ."

Now they were talking as if all the other things they'd said to each other had never been said. That conversation was over.

"Well, for one thing we don't belong to the tsarist aristocracy or the Prussian officer class. Many of us come from peasant stock, and so we can go back to tilling the land again. And as for age. . . . You see, Zavyalov, I want to stay alive a little longer. Retirement means that one day you'll just not be able to leave

your bed. And I don't want to be one of those who die in their beds. So what can I do if I want to stay alive a little longer? And so I'm going to the state farm."

"D'you mean to say you'll give up your Leningrad flat and go all the way to Kazakhstan to..."

"I served in the army for thirty-five years, my young friend, for about eight of which I lived in dugouts and trenches. Don't you remember how it was in the war? Dugouts one day, a baronial mansion the next, and dugouts again the day after that. Even before the war I never stayed long in one place, I'm used to it. The moment I get there, I'll call an engineer company at once..."

"But there are no engineer companies in the Kazakh steppes!" Zavyalov exclaimed.

"Rubbish! There are, everywhere. Maybe they call them something else. Construction workers, or builders, or something... You don't think I've made a wrong decision, do you? Or do you think I am making a fool of myself? That I'd do better to stay here in Leningrad, go strolling up and down the Nevsky, ticking off young officers for not saluting smartly enough, and then watch a film, sitting in reserved seats... Is that your idea? Never! You'll have to go now. I'm supposed to take down the curtains."

"One more minute," said Zavyalov. "There's something I want to ask you. To be frank, I still can't get over my astonishment—will you really leave all this and go off? It's not your having to rough it there I'm thinking of, it's something else. Well, to put it bluntly, do you consider that you, you in particular, are the one to go? Are you sure you can organise a state farm, and get it to work properly?"

Osokin gave him an intent yet guarded look.

"Listen, my friend," he said, "what's your attitude to the personality cult?"

The question was so abrupt and elementary that Zavyalov shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"My attitude? What a curious question! It was because of the cult and everything connected with it

that I was kicked out of the army. You see, I was in occupied territory."

"I see. So you don't like the cult."

"Not like it! Surely that's putting it mildly...."

"Now, now, don't get excited. I had something else in mind when I asked you that question. I wanted to know whether you intend to fight against it. That's what I meant, you see. Of course, it's natural to curse the cult and everything connected with it, and now, after the Congress, it's quite logical to do so. But I'm asking you about something else. For me, for instance, the cult is not simply the deification of Stalin. And not just the arrests and the camps either. Innocent people aren't arrested any more, we all know that. The camps are emptying every day and soon they'll be closed altogether, I expect. Well, what next?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Don't you agree there was more to the cult than 'Long live our great leader and teacher' and the sinister knock on the door at the home of an innocent man in the middle of the night? Didn't the cult show in our economy and particularly in our agriculture? Do you think that to put an end to the cult all we have to do is to expose the ugly side of Stalin's person? To stop the glorification and close down the camps? But what about the impoverished countryside? You must have read the resolutions of the Central Committee Plenary Meeting. How are we to restore common sense and the priority of objective laws in our economic life where they were ousted by arbitrariness and administration, by mere injunction? Let me give you just one example. As long as I can remember we always wrote and made declarations that a true Marxist should never reject the principle of material incentive during the period of socialist and communist construction. But what was done in practice? Did you ever stop to think about it? And that's only one of many examples. If all one does is curse the cult one might as well sit at home or give platform speeches. But if one means to get rid of its consequences one has to fight, in other words, to work.

Work! You asked me whether I believed I could do the job. I do. Especially now, after the Congress. But it's not only a question of believing. You must have the desire, the will to work. Yes, to work," Osokin repeated sharply, somewhat sternly. "I'm not saying I'll bring prosperity to the state farm all by myself, which would be ridiculous of course. But it's up to me and no one else to do whatever I succeed in doing. It's no good believing unless you work. . . ." He paused, then added abruptly:

"Olga did not simply believe in victory. She wanted to win it. She believed that only *her* bullet could finish off the enemy, that only *her* example could be an inspiration to others. It was not vanity, Zavyalov, it was zeal. I've told you everything. Go now."

Zavyalov walked slowly to the door. His hand was already on the door knob when Osokin said:

"Wait a moment."

He went to the desk and pulled open a drawer. Then, without looking, he groped inside and brought out a sheaf of papers held together by an elastic band.

Standing with the papers in his hand Osokin turned his back on Zavyalov for a second. Then he handed him a photograph.

"Take it," he said simply. "It's Olga. Now I've told and given you everything. Everything."



**H**e failed in all his attempts to find out where the mysterious NII-24 had moved.

He went to the Ministry of Chemical Industry, the fuel administration, and the Academy of Sciences. Everywhere he was given a polite reception and a sympathetic hearing. But the moment he mentioned the institute and asked where it was now, his interlocutors looked bored, shrugged their shoulders and answered vaguely.

Zavyalov appreciated the awkwardness of the situation. He had no documents certifying his relationship with Olga. Had the person he was trying to trace been his wife, sister or daughter, everyone would have been more understanding and helpful.

"Is she your wife?" they asked him.

"No . . . a friend . . . a close friend . . . a comrade. . ."

"Oh, I see . . . I see. . ."

There was nothing he could offer these duty-bound people except his rather incoherent story. But it was too little, far too little to get the machinery of all these important state institutions moving.

He did not blame these people, he quite saw their point, because if he were in their place and a stranger had come to him demanding the address of a top-secret institution he would have been cautious too, to say the least.

At last he was told: "All right. Write a letter to comrade . . . what did you say the name was? Yes, Olga Mironova. And leave your address. We'll try to find out what we can. Clear things up. It is possible that your

letter will reach her if she really works at the institute you have in mind."

"How soon can I expect an answer?"

"It's hard to say. . . . Perhaps a month."

He wrote the letter and handed it to them in an open envelope.

The thought of remaining inactive for a whole month with nothing to do except wait seemed intolerable.

Zavyalov was brooding on this when the telephone rang.

"May I speak to Comrade Zavyalov?"

"Speaking."

"What's happened to you? I've been phoning you for two days."

"Who's speaking?"

"Filonov."

"Filonov? I'm sorry, but. . . . Where are you from?"

"I'm the photographer you met at the *Looch* office. Remember?"

"Ah, yes, of course," said Zavyalov with growing excitement. He pressed the receiver hard to his right ear and covered the other with the palm of his hand.

"I just wondered, have you found that woman?" Filonov asked casually, with what sounded like idle curiosity.

"Not yet," Zavyalov said frigidly. The nerve of that young fellow, that dandy in the nylon jacket, to call him up! Why did he want to know whether he'd found Olga? What business was it of his?

"Give me the address then."

"The address? But I told you. . . ."

"No, *your* address."

"Mine? Why?"

"Don't worry, I'm not going to invite myself to dinner. Incidentally you owe me one. All right, I'm taking it down. . . ."

No, it couldn't be just idle curiosity. He knew something. Zavyalov's spirits revived. He rapidly dictated his address.

"Have you found out something?" he asked.

"I'll be with you in ten minutes," Filonov said, ignoring the question. "I have the office car."

Filonov hung up. The conversation was over. It was some seconds before Zavyalov replaced the receiver. He looked at his watch. If the call had come half an hour later he would have already left for work.

Could it be that this photographer chap had some news? Of all the people Korostyleva had been the only person on the *Looch* staff to take an interest in Zavyalov's case. If there had been anything new she would have been the one to phone him. Only she knew his telephone number.

Why Filonov?

He must not let his hopes soar. The times he had deluded himself into thinking that the goal was within reach—all he had to do was go to a certain address, knock at a certain door. . . .

He was more experienced now. He had got used to the idea that he still had a long road to travel. How could Olga's trail have been picked up by this photographer chap of all people? If he really knew something he would have told Zavyalov on the telephone. But instead he made some facetious joke about dinner. There was nothing in it, evidently.

Zavyalov went into the hall, opened the front door and waited. Before long he heard someone bounding up the stairs. And then Filonov appeared on the landing. He looked quite different from the young man Zavyalov remembered. Younger, just a boy, in fact. He was wearing a jersey shirt tucked into his trousers and looked like a young athlete who had just passed the baton to another runner in a relay race and was regaining his breath with difficulty.

"Take the first plane to Taiginsk," Filonov said without preliminaries, as if continuing the telephone conversation. "Hurry up. Otherwise you'll miss him. I've been trying to get you on the phone for the past two days. Taiginsk, Apartment 1, 25 Arsenyevskaya Street. Got it?"

Zavyalov looked at him in bewilderment. Why Taginsk? Whom would he miss? Who lived at 25 Arsenyevskaya Street?

"Of course, you could send a telegram," Filonov went on, "but you wouldn't be able to make things clear enough. And a letter wouldn't reach him in time. So get yourself on a plane."

"And who is it I have to see?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Ivanov, of course. Ivanov who sent that photograph. But remember, he's leaving for Sochi any day. That's why you must hurry. Got it? I must go. I can't keep the car longer than fifteen minutes."

The window was open and from the street below came the urgent tooting of a car horn.

"Well, I'm off," Filonov called, almost at the door.

"Oh no, you're not," Zavyalov said resolutely, barring the way.

"What's the big idea? I promised to bring the car back in fifteen minutes. Our team wants it, they're going on an assignment."

"The team is going, but you're staying here. Afterwards, I'll take you wherever you want to go. In a taxi. I'm late for work too. But I'll find a taxi and drop you on the way. There's a stand round the corner."

As he spoke, he turned the key in the front-door lock and put it in his pocket. Coming back into the living room, he quickly secured the hook on the door and walked to the window.

"Driver!" he called down.

The man poked his head out of the cab window and looked up.

"Comrade Filonov will come a little later in a taxi," Zavyalov shouted. "You needn't wait for him. Good luck."

He waved to the driver, unhooked the door, and let Filonov in. In his rage Filonov looked like a young gamecock spoiling for a fight. His face and even his ears were flushed a bright red, and his wiry hair

stood up in a small aggressive tuft on the top of his head.

"What . . . what sort of games are you playing with me?" he demanded, choking with indignation.

"It's you, my dear friend, who are playing games with me," Zavyalov said in a conciliatory tone. "What you have told me sounds like the mutilated text of a telegram. You could have read it out to me over the phone, if it comes to that. Why did you have to come here?"

"Let me out at once!"

"Don't worry, I will. But first you'll tell me clearly and sensibly what you had to tell me. And after that I'll not only let you out, I'll actually take you to your office myself. I can't believe that your sole purpose in coming here was to blurt out that incomprehensible stuff."

"I was in such a hurry, you see," Filonov said, looking at the floor. "I wanted to see how happy the news would make you. . . . But as it turned out. . . ."

"My dear fellow," Zavyalov said gently. "It's impossible to make head or tail of what you've told me. Have you seen Ivanov? If so, why didn't you ask him where that photograph was taken?"

"But I haven't seen him!" Filonov said in exasperation.

"Come and sit down," Zavyalov's voice was gentler still. "Sit down here. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three," Filonov said, still frowning.

"I wasn't even your age when I met that girl. You said you wanted to bring me some news that would make me happy. I appreciate it. But you've got to use care when you're delivering happiness, you know. You can't just thrust it at a person in that offhand manner . . . see what I mean? Now tell me everything right from the beginning. So, you met Ivanov. . . ."

"I never did, damn it all! Haven't I made that clear? A letter came from him."

"Let me see it."

"You think they'd let me take it? Like hell they would. After the fuss you raised they made such hard and fast rules, you'd be surprised. And anyway there's nothing in his letter, nothing that would interest you, I mean, except the address. He writes that he works in the Far North now. He's due to go on leave in about ten days, he's planning to spend a couple of days at home in Taiginsk, and then fly to Sochi. From the date of the letter I figured out that he must have arrived in Taiginsk today."

"Look here, why did he write at all?"

"Why? When the mail arrived at wherever he is in the Far North he got a copy of the magazine with this photograph in it. And so he wrote to thank us for inserting it, and also to tell us where to send the money for it, it's the address I told you—Apartment 1, 25 Arsenyevskaya Street. If we wanted the money to reach him there, he wrote, we'd better send it pronto because he would be gone in ten days' time. I was there in the office when Korostyleva read the letter. When she finished reading it she showed it to me and rushed to the telephone to ring you up. I told her I'd like to ring you myself, and asked for your phone number. I've been trying for two days—no answer, nobody home. Everything clear now?"

"Yes, everything is clear now. Except for one thing. However, it's beside the point. Why did you suddenly become so interested in my business? Ringing me up for two days, and now coming to see me..."

Filonov didn't reply.

"All right, if you don't want to tell me, it doesn't matter. But anyway, I'm very grateful."

"I'll tell you," Filonov said. "Remember the first time we met? At the editorial office. I told you the photograph was not mine. And the look you gave me was so, how shall I put it..."

"Oh, you imagined it."

"No, I didn't. You looked me up and down with such a scornful expression. I could actually read it: 'You

teddy boy, you and your nylon jacket! You hold nothing sacred, you're incapable of understanding human grief, you're just a cheap dandy, a press photographer! That's what you were thinking. . . ."

"Oh, come now, you're exaggerating," said Zavyalov, feeling embarrassed.

"No, I'm not. I felt really mad with you when you left. What right had you to think that way about me? I'm no loafer, I left college with honours, I've never been a teddy boy. That jacket, if you want to know, was the first decent thing I ever had. I bought it secondhand. All I had before was a coat and a couple of pairs of trousers. I had no parents to support me. I lived on my scholarship money. . . ."

"Hold on, hold on," Zavyalov stopped him gently. "I suppose I got the wrong impression that day thinking you were a bit callous. Here was a young man, I thought, who's never known any real sorrow in his life, yet he was already past feeling anything. . . ."

"Is that what you thought?" Filonov exclaimed with a tremor in his voice. "What d'you know of my feelings? You never looked at me. You were staring at my clothes. You decided offhand that I had never seen anything except the Moscow boulevards, but if you want to know I spent a whole winter in Verkhoyansk, taking pictures for the magazine. And once, the fellows hoisted me high up on to a metal framework and hung me there. . . ."

"Whatever did they do that for?"

"I asked them to do it. Otherwise I'd never have taken the first Buran-Taiginsk train from a new angle. Think how many first trains our photographers have had to take in the forty Soviet years! Readers can't be expected to feel the same thrill any more. And so I wanted the picture to be extra-special, taken from a new angle, so it wouldn't be a repetition of anything done before. Oh, never mind all that. Do you understand now why I came, or don't you?"

Zavyalov did not reply. He felt ashamed of himself.

"All right. I'm sorry, I got it all wrong. But I understand now."

"You don't understand a thing. You think I came to make you feel bad. Nothing of the kind. I wanted to make you happy. If you want to know I'd fly to Taiginsk myself if I could."

For a time they both sat in silence.

"I'll invite you over when I find her and bring her here," Zavyalov said quietly. "Will you come?"

"I certainly will."

"And we'll sit together, the three of us. I once had a young friend. Your age. He'd like to be present but I won't ask him."

"Why not?"

"Oh, it's a long story. But I'll invite you. You've chosen a good profession."

"It's life itself to me. Oh, if only I had more time! If only I were free!"

"Free?" said Zavyalov, as though to himself. "Listen," he asked suddenly, "do you want to be free?"

"How do you mean?"

"Would you like to feel quite independent? Free to do what you want?"

"I don't quite catch on. . . . Ah, I see. Sure, that would be wonderful. I'd go straight off to the North again. And not only the North. I'd manage things so that I'd be everywhere. I'd be there when they were testing a new plane. I'd be there when they were building a new atomic reactor. I'd be there taking pictures when they founded the first state farm on the virgin lands. I'd be flying with you to Taiginsk. Why d'you smile? It is impossible, of course. You can't hope to do everything yourself, and then everyone wants to be the first, but it's nice to dream about it."

"Are you sure everyone wants to be the first?"

"I don't understand the question. Well, of course, there are all sorts of people. Slackers, for instance. . . ."

"No, I don't mean that. Are you sure that the majority of your contemporaries today share your ideas? Is that what they want in life?"



"Today?" asked Filonov. "What a thing to ask! I don't get you at all, Comrade Zavyalov."

"I'll explain in a moment. You see, we live in a time of great change, there are many problems to consider in a new light. What I want to know is how our young people—people like you—feel about it all. Well, if you can express their mood in a single word, in a single phrase. . . ."

"In a single phrase?" said Filonov. He thought for a moment, then said: "All life lies ahead. There you are. If you want it in a nutshell. You asked me about freedom and I answered you. But I don't think I said everything. Freedom, I think, is the knowledge that there's nothing you can't do. D'you see what I mean? You can build a house, say, or become a scientist, draw up a plan to improve life in our country and see that it is carried out, fly to the Moon, speak the truth about people who're no good no matter what position they may occupy. I'm sure you understand what I mean. I'm fully aware that in order to build a house you've got to have knowledge; in order to become a scientist you have to study for years as well as have the calling; you have to be intelligent and know what you're doing too if you're going to carry out reforms in the state. . . . But the knowledge that you can do it, that you have an inalienable right to do it—that also gives you a sense of freedom, doesn't it?"

"I understand. Thank you, my friend. Well, we'd better be off. I hope I haven't used up too much of your time."

"Oh, never mind. I don't have to go with our team. I was worried about the car, that's all. I promised to send it back straight away. It's only a twenty minutes' walk to the office. Goodbye."

Zavyalov shook his hand. It was small, but the grasp was firm.

"Gosh, what an idiot!" Filonov suddenly shouted. "Hit me over the head, come on, hit! I forgot to tell you

something. The main thing. There's a line in that letter--'the photo taken by me in Taiginsk'. Get it? 'Thank you for inserting the photo taken by me in Taiginsk.' If you see Ivanov he'll tell you all the particulars, of course. Remember the name? Taiginsk. Well, that's all now. So long."

He opened the door and made a dash for the stairs.

Zavyalov stood awhile on the landing, listening to the sounds of his impetuous departure.

## 18. ON WITH THE SEARCH

**F**or the first time in his life Zavyalov was flying in a jet passenger plane. His life as an airman had ended with the propeller age. He was demobbed just at the time the Air Force was being re-equipped with jets. He was quite unfamiliar with jet aviation, military or civil.

When he got to Vnukovo, he went to the narrow area railed off from the large airfield.

One could stand there and watch the planes taking off or landing, and the passengers moving in undulating chains, headed by girl attendants in uniform caps, either to or from the planes.

All turned round to stare at the huge TU-104 parked in front of the airport building.

Until then Zavyalov had only seen pictures of this new jet plane. Two other TU-104s stood a little distance away. Groups of people were continually going up and down the ramps—tourists, apparently—and when they were back on earth they remained standing there for a long time, craning their necks—tiny Lilliputians gazing up at Gulliver.

The ordinary propeller planes, of which there were quite a few there, looked small and unexcitingly familiar beside the new giants. No one gave them a glance. They may have been pedestrians crossing the street for all the interest their coming and going aroused. The passengers brought by these planes stopped short the moment they saw the TU-104 and then came forward to examine it more closely.

Zavyalov recalled an illustration he had seen in a book a long time ago: it showed a group of earth dwellers gazing with both respect and apprehension at the huge, queer-looking flying machines that had just come down from some strange worlds. . . .

The incredibly big, cigar-shaped planes with their clipped wings and the strange black holes where the air screws should have been, appeared symbolic to Zavyalov, a material embodiment of the new times, the new season in the life of the people.

He stood leaning hard against the metal railing and looked fixedly at the TU-104 in which he was about to make his long journey. It was not accidental, he thought. Only a plane as powerful as this one could carry him to Olga—so far away she was from him.

He would fly all the way to her. It could be done now. There were diseases which used to mean certain death. Now many of them were no longer fatal—antidotes and drugs had been found for them. There were distances that used to seem insuperable. Now they could be surmounted. There were problems that were once considered insoluble. Now man had proved a match for them. . . .

And now here he was, one of several dozen passengers, in a fantastic TU-104, listening to the steady hum of the turbines.

The plane had taken off from Moscow three hours before. They had still several hours to go to Taiginsk.

Everything had happened suddenly. It hadn't been very easy to ask for five days' leave so soon after he'd returned from his regular month's vacation. But the chief of the flying club, ex-fighter pilot Shumov, a Hero of the Soviet Union, had been very good about it and had let him go at once.

Dusk had fallen. The glow kindled by the sun setting beyond the horizon resembled a sea of molten metal. Nine kilometres down below, a river was winding its course. From up there, it looked like a lustrous ribbon

which had fallen somewhere near the horizon into that boundless sea of molten metal.

The earth grew darker and darker and soon it looked almost black. Zavyalov could make out nothing but the course of the river, now the colour of moonstone.

And then the earth was entirely obscured by clouds. In spite of the whine of the engines Zavyalov felt they were flying in silence with nothing around them except the white clouds below and the cold, lifeless, monochrome sky above.

No fun being a passenger, he reflected. To the men in the pilot's cabin everything seems different. In fact, it's an entirely different sensation taking people somewhere and being taken. It's better to take than to be taken. It doesn't matter how many you're taking. It can be a lot or a few. It can be only two. Or you may be taking only yourself. The whole point is in the sensation of controlled movement, the feel of a sail or an engine. It's the feeling of knowing where you're going, and why you're going there. It's knowing what lies behind the whine of the engines, when it's high and shrill or when it's low and purring, whether it's a sound of power or of danger, or if it's just your ears getting a bit stuffed up that makes the whine sound different. It's knowing the navigation charts. And the flying instruments. Otherwise you feel you're flying nowhere. The feeling can easily come over you when you can't see the ground or the familiar sky—when there's nothing except the mysterious hum of the engines which means nothing to the uninitiated.

The man who was piloting this plane knew everything. And he, too, would have known everything if he'd been sitting there with the crew. There are roads everywhere—on earth, in the sea, in the air. And all those roads meet.

When he started his search for Olga he thought his road was going to be an easy one: to her, then back together.

He remembered a fairy tale: a little girl goes to look for her brother who has been stolen by *Baba Yaga* the

witch. She goes on and on. To make things worse she comes to a dried-up stream which asks her to clear its bed; she meets a bird who asks her to pick up a fledgling that has fallen out of its nest; she is stopped by mountains and forests who beg her to help them out of their troubles. . . . She's in a hurry, a dreadful hurry, but she helps the stream and the bird and the mountains and the forests. But when she's on her way back with her little brother in her arms, running away from *Baba Yaga* who is on her heels, the flooded river parts before her, the bird carries her through the air, the trees bend back their branches and the mountains shift to let her and her brother pass and then draw together to block the way for *Baba Yaga*. . . . Korostyleva, Prokhorova, Liza, Sokolov, Osokin and Pavel Shevlyagin . . . so many people, so many fates, some happy, others not. He could not help becoming involved. Of course, he could take a jump across the dry stream, he could shout to the bird: "Sorry, I'm in a hurry", he could make a detour round the mountains, look for easy paths through the forest and tell everyone: "I haven't time for you. I'm in a hurry. I'm looking for Olga, she's all I want. Don't bother me with your worries. I'm in a hurry." They'd only smile at him. They wouldn't insist. Others would help them, people with kinder hearts. But he couldn't look to them for help on his way back when he had found Olga and was carrying her home. "What are you carrying?" they'd ask. And he'd reply: "I'm carrying her. My only one. The one who is everything in life to me. The one I was so anxious to find. The one who means more to me than all of you." But they'd only shrug their shoulders. . . .

At first he had the mistaken notion that his road was isolated from others. Now he knew that all roads met—both in the air and on the earth. A man was not a lonely star. And then it was only from the earth that stars looked lonely. You stood and looked upwards and thought: just me and that distant star, and nothing but empty space between us. What a mistake!

Now, once he'd found her, he'd never go back. One should never go back. He just did not grasp it at once. A mortal wasn't given to understand everything at once. The experience of others was necessary. But it had never taught anyone all there was to know. There were roads you had to traverse on your own feet. There were things you had to see with your own eyes. It didn't matter how many thousands of others had seen them. You knew that everything around you had changed. You'd read about it in the newspapers. A warm wind was blowing through the land. Why, you could even see it in people's faces. All the same you had to feel its breath on your own face. You had to see the change with your own eyes. No, it wasn't only a matter of feeling and seeing. You had to be a part of what you felt and saw. Because every change was you, and the warm wind was you too, and the star you wanted to reach, and the world, and the people in it, and the wind and the storm—that was you too. You couldn't pluck a star from the sky and just take it away.

Another hour passed. The plane was still flying above the clouds. What was happening below? Perhaps it was raining. Were there towns and villages below with brilliantly lit streets? Were there speeding cars and trains, or carts bumping along country roads? And people—they'd look so tiny from this altitude—going about, meeting and parting, speaking to each other, arguing, agreeing with each other, falling in love, quarrelling, dreaming, building. . . .

But here, at a height of nine kilometres, everything was serene and calm. In life there always was a calm haven, an asylum in the midst of a storm. In life—that meant in the human soul. But there were people who had long ago thrown away the key to that haven. While others always kept the door open and tried to be near at hand. Pavel Shevlyagin. . . . He would probably be counting the days till his, Zavyalov's, return. With Pavel no one could take his place. But, as a matter of fact, no one could take anyone's place. Others could complete things you had left undone, they could help people

you had failed to help. But what you were supposed to do yourself, you and no one else must do. Osokin was right. It was an illusion, the self-comfort of an egoist, to think that your departure could pass unnoticed, that people would close ranks and everything would be the same as before.

Sure everything would *look* the same. But only because the burden you had carried on your shoulders would have been taken up by others. And the words you ought to have said would be spoken by others. And those you would have loved would be loved by others, and those you should have punished would be punished by others. And to the ones who were waiting for you—only for you—others would come.

Slowly the plane began its descent. But the term “slowly” loses its usual meaning when applied to jet aviation. Ragged wisps of cloud flashed past the window and the plane seemed to be dropping like a plummet towards the earth.

Zavyalov pressed his face to the plexiglass and looked down. He made out features of the earth below, first vaguely and then more distinctly, till finally he saw chains of lights in a pattern rather like the Great and Little Bear together.



## 19. SEE YOU THIS EVENING

**Z**avyalov took a train from the airfield into town. He stood on the platform, deserted at this early hour. On the station square a short queue had formed at a bus stop. He walked over to it and asked the way to Arsenyevskaya Street. A woman told him to go along the embankment, pointing vaguely in its direction.

For a long time he walked through the gardens laid out on the embankment. It was very windy, the gardens were deserted except for a young girl, wearing a light-coloured raincoat buttoned up and with the collar raised, who for some strange reason was sitting on a bench right in the face of the wind, reading a book.

Arsenyevskaya Street ran parallel with the embankment. Number 25 was an old log house built in the sturdy manner of the north.

He knocked on the door. It was opened by a round-faced girl.

When he enquired for Ivanov she asked him in and launched into a long-winded explanation. Ivanov worked in the Far North but his family—his wife Anna Fyodorovna and their daughter Grunya—lived here. But he wouldn't be able to see Ivanov or Anna Fyodorovna or Grunya because they'd all left the day before for the Caucasus and wouldn't be back for a month.

So he'd missed Ivanov. If he'd not lost those two days when Filonov was vainly trying to get him on the phone, if he'd flown to Taiginsk two or even one day earlier, he'd have caught him.

"D'you know exactly where they have gone?" Zavyalov asked. "To Sochi, or Gagra perhaps? Did they mention the name of the rest home or health home?"

"Sochi, it is Sochi," the girl said quickly. "Only there's no name of any rest home. They hadn't booked anywhere, they were hoping to get fixed up when they got there. Anna Fyodorovna was all for a rest home, but Ivan Vasilyevich was dead set against it: no, he said, not on your life, he said, I want to be a free agent, I don't want to have a routine forced on me, he said. If I feel like going for a swim, I'll go and have my swim, if I feel hungry—I'll go and eat. I have no use for all those time-tables, he said.... Is there anything you want me to tell the Ivanovs when they get back?"

"No, thanks," said Zavyalov. "It doesn't matter. By the way, do you happen to know whether NII-24 is here in town?"

"What is it? The number of a house? Or is it a street?"

"No. ... Well, I'll be off."

"Would you care for a cup of tea?"

"No, thanks."

Aimlessly, he started in the direction of the centre of the town. He now turned down an asphalted, handsome street with neatly trimmed lime trees on both sides.

He decided to try and find out the address he wanted by springing the question on the first person he met. A chap wearing a striped jersey came along, and Zavyalov asked him to direct him to the institute.

"The Veterinary, you mean?" the chap asked.

And so the first attempt was a flop.

Zavyalov walked on slowly with no idea what to do next. Somewhere deep down he believed that he might simply run into Olga. After all, why not? It was a small town, people were on their way to work at this hour....

He peered into the faces of the passers-by. After a while he picked on an elderly man carrying a brief case to ask him where the Chemical Institute was.

"The Chemical Institute?" the man repeated blankly, and stopped.

"Maybe it's not what it's called," Zavyalov tried to make it clearer. "Anyway, it's one of those institutes known by a number," he added, aware of the inanity of his words.

The man with the brief case vouchsafed no answer. He merely shrugged and walked off. They both glanced over their shoulders simultaneously, and instinctively Zavyalov increased his pace. It occurred to him then that such haste on his part might appear suspicious, and so he stopped in front of a billboard announcing a football match. When he turned round again, the man was gone.

Zavyalov walked on. Several times he crossed the street and hurried after some woman who from afar seemed to resemble Olga. Overtaking her, he glanced back stealthily to see her face. . . .

He reached a small square with benches in it and behind the benches a number of boards covered with figures and percentages. They gave the growth of labour productivity, gross output and the expansion of arable land in the region. Down the side ran a list of factories, collective and state farms. Zavyalov looked at these first. But he realised at once that it was foolish to hope to find the name of a research institute there.

He glanced round the square. On the façade of a nearby three-storey yellow building he read the words: TAIGINSK TOWN COMMITTEE OF THE C.P.S.U. Ah, they would know about the institute there. That was axiomatic. Naturally, there was a Party Committee in every town and they'd know about every enterprise in their town. But the idea of applying for their help hadn't occurred to Zavyalov till then. Possibly because at the back of his mind he knew how absurd it would be to do so: how could the Party Committee give such information to just any stranger who walked in from the street?

On leaving Ivanov's house half an hour before Zavyalov had felt confident that in a town this size he'd have no trouble finding the institute—considering its significance—even without Ivanov's help. But it had proved

much harder than he thought. Asking questions about a top-secret institute would eventually land him in hot water. He had no choice but to go to the Party Committee.

He climbed two flights of stairs. There was no one in the small reception room. He looked at his watch—a quarter to nine. Too early, evidently. But he decided to tap on the door of the Party Secretary's office.

"Come in."

Sitting at a desk with his back to the window was a young man.

"Excuse me," said Zavyalov. "Are you the Secretary of the Town Party Committee? I'd like to have a word with you."

"Can't be done," the man replied in an unaccountably gay tone. "I'm just leaving. Waiting for the car."

"And when will you be back?" Zavyalov asked disappointedly.

"I'll be away all day today," the secretary said in the same eager, good-natured manner. "I'm going to the cement works for their annual election meeting. Where are you from, Comrade?"

Zavyalov liked the look of this young man. He couldn't be more than twenty-five and his leanness and fairness made him seem even younger. He had a funny way of speaking too. Coming from him the most ordinary words sounded as if they were the jolliest, happiest things anyone could say.

"I've come from Moscow," said Zavyalov with an impulsive smile.

"Oh-ho!" said the secretary. "All the way from Moscow! What organisation do you represent?"

"I don't represent any organisation," Zavyalov hurried to explain. "I meant to say I live in Moscow. I've come here on a purely personal matter."

"You don't say!" the secretary exclaimed. "All the way from Moscow to Taiginsk on personal business. How interesting! Good, tell me about it. No, it can't be done, I'm afraid. I expect the car's here. One minute. . ."

He swung his chair round to the window, stood up and glanced down into the street.

"No, it hasn't come yet. Very well, fire away."

"First of all, Comrade Secretary, I'd like to show you my papers so that you know who I am."

He put his hand into his pocket but the secretary made a warning gesture.

"Look here, Comrade," he said with a slight frown, "you haven't come to the militia. If I want to know your name and who you are I have only to ask you. My name, for example, is Pyotr Stepanovich Lukashev. And yours?"

"Vladimir Andreyevich Zavyalov."

"As good a name as any, I'd say," the secretary said in the old jovial tone. "Well, what's it all about, Vladimir Andreyevich?"

It took Zavyalov no more than a few minutes to tell his story. He had already learnt to tell it briefly, mentioning only the main points and keeping to the facts without putting too much feeling into his voice.

"Listen, Comrade Zavyalov, why are you in such a hurry?" Lukashev interrupted him suddenly. He seemed to have forgotten that a few minutes before he'd been casting impatient glances through the window. "This is all extraordinarily interesting. So you saw her picture in a magazine. Just think of that! How did it happen exactly?"

Zavyalov went into more detail. He began with that day at the rest home when he saw Olga's photograph in *Looch*, then he described his visit to the editorial office and to the Missing Persons Department. . . . But when he reached the subject of the institute he hesitated a little.

"I found out that the photograph was taken somewhere here in Taiginsk. That means the institute is here. I need the address. I realise that my request sounds naïve, not to say suspicious. But I have no choice, Comrade Lukashev, please try to see that. Mironova isn't a big shot, she's not even a qualified engineer. She's a rank-and-file worker. Her name doesn't figure in the

lists they keep in Moscow. It's only on the spot that I can try to find out whether she's working at that institute. That's why I came to you for help. It took me some time to make up my mind to do so."

Out in the street a motor-car horn gave several sharp toots. But to Zavyalov's relief Lukashev didn't even turn his head.

"All right, let me see your papers," Lukashev said suddenly. He examined them and, as he handed them back, said: "Listen, Comrade Zavyalov. If you manage to find your Olga will you speak at our Komsomol meeting tomorrow?"

"What?" Zavyalov said in bewilderment.

"Don't be so surprised. I'm looking at this matter from my own angle, the Party Secretary's, I mean. It would be very interesting and instructive for the young people to hear your story. Make them realise what real feelings are. Some have no idea real love exists. It's very dangerous when a boy's or a girl's first love turns into just a cheap, sordid affair. They get into the habit of having such affairs and become incapable of ever loving anyone. You probably find it strange that I should be talking to you like this, but don't be surprised. After all, I used to work with the Komsomols. I was secretary of a town Komsomol Committee until a short while ago. True, not in this town but... Well, d'you promise?"

"But first of all..." Zavyalov said anxiously.

"Of course, I understand," Lukashev interrupted. "First of all you have to find her. But if you do, you promise? Right? And we'll ask her to speak too. From what you've told me, she must be a heroic woman. Most of our young people have only the vaguest memories of the war..."

At that moment the office door was pushed open and a man wearing a faded wartime tunic and high rubber boots came in.

"We'll be late, Pyotr Stepanovich," he said. "I've signalled to you three times already. It's nine fifteen." He held out his left arm and tapped the glass of his

watch. "We've got to be there at ten sharp. And you know what the road's like."

"Don't rush, Yegor Kuzmich. I'll be with you in a minute."

Lukashev stood up. Zavyalov did the same.

"Look here, Comrade Zavyalov," Lukashev was strictly official for once. "I can't tell you anything about the institute. Neither one way nor another, as they say. But one thing I promise you. Wait for me to get back. I'll be here towards evening. Then I'll tell you definitely whether Mironova is in the area covered by our town or not. Agreed?" He took a sheet of paper from the desk. "I'll make a note: Mironova Olga. . . ."

"Alexeyevna," said Zavyalov.

"Alexeyevna," repeated Lukashev. "Wait for me at the hotel. I'll phone and tell them to give you a room. See you this evening."

## 20. YOU MUSTN'T BELIEVE HER!

**F**rom the outside the hotel was most unattractive. The façade, painted yellow, looked washed out and streaky. A huge drainpipe ran down the wall at angles with an accordion pleat halfway down. The front door looked warped. But inside it was quite a cozy place. It had an old-fashioned, stuffy coziness with its inevitable copy of Perov's *Hunters* on the wall, a threadbare runner in the corridor, potted rubber plants, pier glasses, clocks with swinging pendulums, small sofas in white linen covers, and worn blue velvet curtains at the windows. Fire extinguishers alternated with still-life prints on the walls in the passages, and each landing had its large bust of Lenin mounted on a pillar-like stand. There was the radio, of course, which in hotels of this type is never switched off.

The tiny room where the receptionist brought Zavyalov was also very neat and cozy.

"Will you be staying long?" she asked.

"I expect to leave tomorrow," he said. "However, if. . ."

"Oh yes, of course, I understand," she promptly took the cue. "It all depends on how soon you finish your business here."

"Yes, that's right. Tell me please, is there an enquiry office near here?"

"What's that?"

"I mean a place where you can make enquiries about a person or an enterprise. . ."

"What use could we have for an enquiry office here? This is a small town, everyone knows everything there



is to know here anyway. What's the name of the enterprise you want?"

"It's a person. . . . This person lives in your town."

"Go to the address bureau then. It's in Sovietskaya Street, Number 5."

Although the address bureau and the enquiry office were obvious places to go to, it was only now that Zavyalov thought of them. The futility of his efforts in Leningrad had led him to think that he would never find Olga unless he first discovered the whereabouts of her top-secret institute. He realised now that he could make one more attempt to find out her private address by going to the address bureau. It was as simple as that. It was Lukashev who gave him the idea when he promised to find out if Olga was "in the area covered by the town". It was the way he worded it that made Zavyalov think. Naturally, he thought, the private addresses of the staff members of a top-secret institute may not be listed in the public directory. It was also very probable that the staff lived in a special township such as many institutes of this kind were known to maintain. In that case he'd get no information from the address bureau. But still. . . .

Minutes later he was at a long wooden counter filling in an enquiry form. The thin office pen he was writing with came to a standstill for a moment when he got to the "Date of Birth" column. When he first met Olga in 1941 she was seventeen. So she must have been born in 1924. That made her thirty-two. Was Olga thirty-two? He couldn't believe it.

He handed the form to the girl behind the counter.

"When shall I come for the answer? In an hour or so?"

"Lord no!" the girl sounded surprised. "Just take a seat over there, I'll give you the information in a moment."

She disappeared behind a door leading into an inner office.

"Here you are," she said, coming back and holding out a piece of paper. "It'll be fifty kopeks,"

Zavyalov snatched the paper out of the girl's hand to her great astonishment. There! It said 11 Marx Street.

He made a dash for the door.

"Wait a minute! Your change!" the girl called out.

But he did not hear her. He was running down the corridor. The militiaman at the door followed him with a puzzled look.

...A fat middle-aged woman wearing a flowery Gypsy shawl draped round her shoulders opened the door. From a far room came the sounds of a piano.

"I beg your pardon," Zavyalov gasped out the words. "Can I see Comrade Mironova? Olga Alexeyevna Mironova. She lives here, doesn't she?"

"No, thank God," the woman answered sharply, taking hold of the handle to slam the door shut.

"Wait a minute!" Zavyalov shouted, wedging in his shoulder.

"That person doesn't live here any more," the woman said icily. The sounds of the piano broke off.

"Who is it, Mother?" a girl's voice asked, and a minute later the girl herself appeared in the hall. She looked about twenty.

"It's got nothing to do with you, go and practise," the woman told her without turning round. She tried again to shut the door.

"No, please, please," Zavyalov implored her. "I have official information. . . . Here, take a look. . . . It says Mironova, Olga Mironova. . . ."

"Oh, Mother, how can you! You mustn't!" the girl said reproachfully. And then to Zavyalov: "Please come in. It's all right, do come in."

He walked in resolutely, and closed the door behind him.

"What do you want here?" the woman demanded.

"Why, I told you I want to see Comrade Mironova. The address bureau told me she lives here."

"She hasn't been living here for close on two years now."

"But she did live here, didn't she?" Zavyalov cried,

unable to conceal his despair. "Then maybe you know where..."

"Mother!" the girl spoke reproachfully again. "Please come in," she said to Zavyalov. "We can't stand out in the hall..."

He followed the girl in.

What a strange room! It was cluttered with cracked mahogany furniture on which the dust lay thick and undisturbed. An old grandfather's clock that looked like an up-ended sarcophagus was stolidly ticking away in one corner. A torn, time-yellowed lace cloth covered the round table in the middle of the room. The hardwood floor badly wanted polishing and the slip covers on the armchairs were drab and faded. The door into the next room was open and there stood a grand piano.

The woman, holding the ends of her flowery shawl, came in after Zavyalov. He was able to take a good look at her now. She was past fifty. She must have been beautiful once. But now there were baggy folds under her eyes, and her skin looked sallow, unclean. However, it was easy to guess how beautiful she must have been by just glancing at her daughter. Two such different women, they yet resembled each other in some elusive way—the shape of their eyes, perhaps, or the line of their lips.

"Valya, go to your room," the woman said sternly, without raising her voice however. "Do you hear me? I told you..."

Twitching her shoulders, the girl went into the next room and closed the door.

"What do you want here?" the woman asked Zavyalov again. "I told you: we have nothing to do with Citizen Mironova any more."

Citizen Mironova! Zavyalov himself had once been compelled to call Olga that in his written application to Prokhorova, but hearing it from the lips of this woman infuriated him.

"I have been trying to find Olga Mironova for a long time," he said. "I have tracked her down at last..."

"What has she been up to now?" The woman pursed her lips in a fastidious grimace.

"You have an amazing gift for putting the wrong construction on people's words," Zavyalov said drily. "I have private reasons for wanting to find her. The address bureau has directed me here. . . ."

"She lived here until about two years ago. And then she moved."

"Where to?"

"How should I know? It doesn't interest me in the least. Believe me, it was the happiest day in our life when that snake left us. We stood her for almost a year."

Funny thing, he felt no anger at all. The words left him cold. It dawned on him suddenly that she was talking about someone else, not his Olga.

"I'm sorry," he said with relief. "It's obviously another coincidence. The same thing happened in Lenin-grad. It's another person I'm trying to find, I see it quite clearly now. The Mironova you mean is not the Olga Mironova I'm trying to find," he spoke gently, in the tone of an apology. "I was furious at first, as you may have noticed. But you'll easily understand why. People who know Olga Mironova have nothing but kind things to say of her. The Olga Mironova I mean fought at the front. I thought she was dead, killed in the war twelve years ago. But now I've found out that she's alive and works here in Taiginsk at a research institute. All the people I have spoken to tell me that she has done them more than one good turn. . . ."

As he spoke he watched the woman's expression, never doubting that it would soften, that she would smile and say how sorry she was she spoke so rudely because it was obvious now that the woman who used to live with them had nothing to do with the Olga Mironova he was trying to find.

But her expression remained as vicious as before.

"There's no coincidence here. It's the same Mironova. The one I mean was a front-line fighter too, and then she worked here at the institute where they make

kerosene for airplanes or something. I'm sorry to see a man as attractive as you, a man who's still young, wasting his time on. . . ."

"Stop it!" Zavyalov burst out, clenching his fists. "Don't you dare. . . ."

"Don't I? Who says I don't?" She threw back her head haughtily. "Breaking into my flat and forcing me, at the point of a gun practically, to speak about a female who poisoned our lives for us, for my daughter and me. . . ."

"Impossible!"

"What's impossible about it?" She drew the words out, almost singing them, as she took a step back to look him up and down with fine disdain. "You said, I believe, that you haven't seen the woman for twelve years. I had the pleasure of making her acquaintance about three years ago. For almost a year I lived with her in the same house. So which of us can be a better judge? You or I?"

There was some logic in that. Zavyalov was at a loss for a fitting rejoinder, and the woman sensed his momentary confusion.

"I'm not angry with you," she said in honeyed tones. "But you must realise that one can't do things your way! Breaking into my flat as if you were an NKVD agent in the days of Beria. . . ." She pronounced the letters NKVD with a French accent.

"I'm sorry if that's how it was."

"Oh, I understand. I do understand. There are situations in which a person can't help losing his head. It happens to me too, quite often. However, nothing is so precious as truth, and I could not conceal from you the truth about a person who. . . ."

"But what was the trouble, why don't you tell me in plain words?"

"Oh, the trouble, the trouble! You must understand that there are family situations which well-bred people do not disclose to strangers. I shan't go into details, all I can tell you is that she made our lives unbearable. She wormed her way into my confidence. She turned my

daughter's brain, and drove her to the brink of ruin. She shattered the peace and quiet of this family. Oh, that woman! The mere recollection of those months when she lived in my house puts my nerves on edge. And please don't glare at me like that. I have chosen the mildest, the kindest expressions. I do understand how you feel, though. You knew the woman when, I suppose, she was very young. Relatively speaking, of course. Although I'm quite sure she must have had those bad instincts even then. I believe in Lombroso's theory, you see. . . ."

This was more than he could stand. He thrust his hands into his pockets to hide the savagery with which he was clenching his fists.

"Look here," he said. "Will you or will you not tell me what you are blaming Olga Mironova for? Damn it all, what charges are you bringing against her?"

"What charges, you say?" the woman asked shrilly. "Good God, I've no end of charges to bring against her. She snaked her way into our home. She was homeless, she had nowhere to live, and I took her in. Money had nothing to do with it, never think that, the rent she paid was purely nominal. It wasn't her money I wanted, it was companionship. Since my husband died, he was an architect with a name in this town," she made a pause, puckering her lips, and then continued: "I was left alone with a daughter on my hands, and all I wanted was companionship, a friendly soul who'd understand. It was well known to everyone that mine was a splendid, intellectual home, and so I was asked. . . . Anyway, I took her in, this Mironova woman. I believed in her reputation, her orders and medals. . . . Heavens, how deceptive those things can be! She corrupted my daughter. I will be frank—after all, we are grown-up people—she actually pushed her into a man's bed. . . ."

"Stop it!" Zavyalov shouted. "It's a monstrous lie! I don't believe a word of it. She can't, she couldn't! You're lying, lying, I tell you!"

"Who, me?" the woman shrieked, recoiling. "Me, Nadezhda Pavlovna Kolomiitseva, I'm lying, you say?"

The whole town knows me, and who are you? I wanted to help you, to open your eyes. . . . And you? Get out of my house! Get out! Get out!"

She advanced on Zavyalov, shaking her upraised arms, trailing along the floor the flowery shawl which had slipped off her shoulders and had got caught in one of her high heels.

"Get out, get out, get out!"

Zavyalov stood motionless in the middle of the pavement, still feeling dazed. Passers-by walked round him, glancing back over their shoulders.

His first sensation on recovering from the shock was a terrible, insuperable weariness. He barely managed to drag himself to the hotel, which belched a cacophony of radio sounds. Once in his room he fell across the bed, just as he was—in his street clothes. The radio was emitting some shrill squeaks, but he did not hear, he thought a dead silence had fallen.

One thing was definite: Olga had really lived in that house in Marx Street. But why did that woman speak of her with such undisguised hatred? What happened? It was horrible to think that Olga had been compelled to live there for a whole year. And then she moved. That's what the woman said: "And then she moved." She did not say "left" or "left town". She said "moved". How could he have let those very important words go unnoticed? No, he believed he did ask her where. Yes, he remembered her answer: "How should I know?" Olga did not leave town, she simply moved to another house, and that was the most important thing of all. It meant that she still lived here, only she had moved to the institute's township, he supposed. Everything fitted together quite naturally now: the institute moved to Taiginsk from Leningrad, the staff had to live somewhere while houses were being built for them, and so they had to rent rooms. Olga too. Within a year the houses were ready and she moved into her new flat. It followed from this that Lukashev would know everything. But he couldn't see him until later, until about four hours later.

This was the way he saw it: there'd be a knock on the door and a voice would say: "Comrade Zavyalov, there's someone here who wants to see you." He'd jump up, push the door open and see the receptionist, and behind her—Olga. Lukashev would have rung her up at the institute and told her. . . .

What then? They'd leave for Moscow that very night. No, they couldn't, Olga wasn't free to go. No need to worry though, they'd accept her resignation. Or at any rate they'd give her leave. Lukashev would help too, he was a good, understanding sort. . . .

They'd return to Moscow, and then. . . .

They'd go *there*. They'd go as far as the train would take them and then they'd find their way somehow to that forest glade, overgrown with tall grass and surrounded by pine woods. They'd stay there till nightfall, they'd see the distant stars above them. And then a new day would dawn and birds they could not see would burst into song. . . .

God, how long ago that was! The forest was at war then, the thunder of artillery fire, muffled by the solid wall of trees, resounded hollowly in their forest glade, and the stars winked and faded, dimmed by the fire-works display of tracers. Time that didn't belong to them went quickly, and the minute hand on his phosphorescent watch face moved inexorably. . . .

No, there was no reality in this. It was sheer utopia. You couldn't eat the same cake twice—that's a school-room truism. The airfield wasn't there any longer. Nor was the forest glade. Even if it was there, they'd never find it. The paths they knew had long been overgrown with grass. There were new paths and new roads. Huge trucks carrying heavy peacetime loads were speeding along those roads now. Thirteen times now the grass in that nameless forest glade had grown to its full height and in its season drooped. The birds singing their pre-dawn songs belonged to a new generation. He was no longer twenty. And Olga was not eighteen. All that was past. She would not stay long with him in that forest glade—she was too busy. He, too, would



have to hurry back. There was his work, his lectures, and his trainees. They would be together, Olga and he, but not there in the forest glade. He did not know yet where they'd live—in Moscow or in Taiginsk. How absurd to imagine that they could pick up the threads of their life together from the moment of their parting.

A knock on the door.

"Comrade Zavyalov, here's someone..."

It was the receptionist.

"Here's someone..." she repeated.

Behind her stood the daughter of that woman in Marx Street.

"Please come in," Zavyalov said in some confusion.

"Your name is Valya, isn't it? This is so unexpected..."

She came into the room. Her face showed traces of recent tears, but her lips were compressed into a firm line. She kept tugging and pulling at a tear-soaked handkerchief.

"Please sit down..."

Her movements were stiff and awkward as she walked to the chair and sat down.

"I came..." she said and fell silent, the line of her mouth tightening still more. Her eyes filled with tears again.

"Don't... please..."

She made a gesture of negation with her hand.

"I'm not going to cry, don't worry. Please don't be angry at me for coming. I watched you from my window as you stood there in the street and then walked away. I followed you here. There's something I must tell you. I didn't dare come in for a long time. I walked around the hotel again and again... and here I am..."

"You did the right thing!"

Zavyalov spoke in a loud, cheery voice, hoping it would help the girl to pull herself together and not burst into tears.

"I came for a definite purpose... I want to tell you everything so you won't believe a word she says. You mustn't believe her... You must not! My mother hates Olga Alexeyevna... Mother sees an enemy in

her . . . it may be because we lived at her expense. . . " she finished in a voice so low it was almost a whisper.

"What happened actually?" Zavyalov prompted her, unable to endure the long pause.

"I'll tell you in a minute," Valya said, giving her eyes a final dab with the sodden handkerchief. "Daddy died in 1951. He was an architect. Mother and I were alone in the world. I was seventeen, I had just finished school. I don't know what went wrong with Mother then. Maybe she was scared we wouldn't be able to manage on Daddy's pension, or maybe it was something else . . . I don't really know. When Daddy was with us we used to make plans for my future, and the idea was that I'd go to Leningrad after school and enter the conservatoire. But everything came down with a crash. . . . I realised I had to start earning money right away. Construction began on a new electric power station just then, and many of the boys and girls I went to school with got jobs there. I very much wanted to work there too. But Mother wouldn't hear of it. She's a dominating person, and stubborn besides—you've seen her. 'Only a stupid young fool can want to go round wearing a padded cotton jacket and rubber boots,' she kept saying to me. 'Valya Kolomiitseva, the architect's daughter, in a padded jacket! You'll forfeit your youth, your hands will coarsen, you'll ruin your complexion. Who'll want you then? I'm not going to live for ever, and you'll have to fend for yourself. Get yourself a husband, make a good match.' "

She sighed disconsolately, closed her eyes for a moment, and then looked up at Zavyalov again.

"I had a friend, Vasya, we went to school together. He wanted me to be his girl when we were still at school. We were just kids. And we only kissed once. . . . After school he went to work as a welder, and he often came over to our place. . . . Mother hated him. A common mill hand, she called him, a hopeless case, and she kept telling me that he was just giving me the run around to get hold of our flat. It wasn't true. Vasya was in love with me. It was me he wanted, not the

flat. . . . And he wasn't a hopeless case, either, because he got enrolled at the Building Institute the following year, working in the daytime and studying nights. He would have made out anyway, because he was so keen, he loved life, travel, new places and the excitement of building something new. . . . I told Mother that I was going to marry him. She beat me up, for the first time in my life, she struck me across the face very hard. Then she sobbed, said she was sorry, pleaded with me and swore that our marriage would kill her, that I was all she had and that she lived for me alone. What can you know of life, she told me, you're mistaking a childish infatuation for real love. She never let Vasya in any more, she watched me like a hawk, twice she caught me in the park with him and threatened that if she ever saw us together again she'd make a public row or would even commit suicide. I gave in to her. . . ."

She dropped her head lower still.

"And what happened soon afterwards was this. The man who had been Daddy's boss, an architect too, came on business from Sibirsk. He worked there in the regional department. We usually put him up when he came to Taiginsk. He was a widower of fifty or so. Why make a long story of it? Mother made me marry him. She used everything: tears, threats and persuasion. . . .

"No!" Valya cried, tossing her head. "No, you mustn't think that I gave in without a battle. But then I submitted."

"And Vasya?" Zavyalov asked.

"Vasya? I jilted him. . . . I didn't tell him anything until my wedding day. . . . You naturally think I'm bad, don't you?"

He found nothing to say to this.

"I lived in Sibirsk for a year, but that was as much as I could stand. We had a good flat and enough money, I even sent Mother some every month. But . . . I couldn't stand it any longer. I didn't care for him, I was living a lie, and then I grew to hate him. I ran away and came back here. When I got home I found a strange woman living in my room. "This is Olga

Alexeyevna Mironova, our lodger,' Mother told me, smiling sweetly. Olga Alexeyevna went out and Mother and I were alone. I was sure she'd start crying, scolding and threatening me again. But strangely enough nothing happened. She was a changed person. 'It's quite all right about leaving that old fool,' she said to me. 'We'll manage. A very important institute, working for defence, has just been moved here from Leningrad. Do you realise what sort of people work there? Professors, scientists, State Prize winners, young specialists. There's nothing they don't have: big pay, private cars, flats, everything. They have money to burn. I was lucky to get this lodger. She'll introduce you to their crowd, imagine what a pick of husbands you'll have!'

"After what she told me I couldn't help disliking Olga Alexeyevna, because I thought they'd arranged the whole thing between them, that it was all sort of included in the rent," Valya resumed after a pause. "But a week passed, another week and another, and not a professor came to see Olga Alexeyevna, and anyway she stayed working at the institute till late day after day. She only came home to sleep. And so it went on. I played the piano, read books and waited for something to happen, I don't know what, and I hardly went out of doors. There was nothing I dreaded more in the world than running into Vasya. I was afraid he'd throw it in my face that I'd sold myself for money. Vasya was in the news in those days as the best team-leader. They had his picture in the newspaper once. I cut it out and hid it. Inside the piano. I wasn't on very friendly terms with Olga Alexeyevna. But once I woke up in the middle of the night and saw the light in Mother's room. I also heard voices. Mother was complaining about money difficulties, saying that her widow's pension wasn't enough to live on, that I wanted to study music, and so on. And then Olga Alexeyevna said: 'Please take half my pay from now on, Nadezhda Pavlovna. I want you to, as a friend. I'd like to help Valya. And really I have more than I can spend....' Mother was overjoyed, of course, she couldn't thank her

enough. The following night I intercepted Olga Alexeyevna on her way home from work and told her I had to talk to her. We went and sat in a park near our house. 'I heard Mother and you talking,' I said to her. 'I want no charity from you. Music itself has become hateful to me.' And she said: 'I understand. What else have you got to say?' Frankly, I lost control completely and got really nasty. 'Why haven't you kept your part of the bargain?' I demanded. 'Where are all those professors you promised to bring? Why don't they come?' I called her a humbug, I told her she needn't bother to lie because I knew all about their plot from Mother. 'Oh well,' I said, 'do your match-making then, only remember that this time the stakes will be higher—I want a villa, not just a flat, and a private car.' She cut me short so sharply, it was like the lash of a whip. 'Shut up, you fool! What is all this nonsense? What bargain am I supposed to have made? With whom?' It dawned on me then that Mother had made it all up. Olga Alexeyevna had no part in Mother's scheming, no suspicion of it even. I burst into tears and told her everything. She listened without interrupting, and then said: 'Poor girl, what a mess you've made of your life. Your mother is to blame, of course, but it's mostly your own fault. D'you imagine it's Vasya you've cheated? No, it's yourself, it's yourself you have cheated and betrayed.' And then, very strangely, she added: 'I fell in love when I was seventeen. . . . He is dead, killed in the war. Oh, if only a miracle would happen, and he'd turn out to be alive. . . .' I'm sorry, am I boring you with my chatter?"

"Please go on," Zavyalov said tensely.

"You didn't seem to be listening. . . . Well, a week later, Olga Alexeyevna said to Mother: 'I've invited a man to dinner tomorrow, I hope you don't mind. He's a very nice young man, he's doing very well now, but his prospects are even better.' Mother was delighted, all smiles and gratitude. She gave the rooms an extra polish and prepared the meal. And who do you think Olga Alexeyevna brought? My Vasya. Mother nearly

fainted. I was so embarrassed, I wished I could sink through the floor, but in my heart of hearts I was glad he came. And Olga Alexeyevna said suavely: 'This is Vasily Borisovich. . . . Oh, you know each other? Really! It is a small world, isn't it. I've been practising my wiles on him for a long time, but he could never come, he's so awfully busy, you know . . . it's such a large construction project, and being the Komsomol Secretary. . . .' I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. As soon as Vasya left we had a terrible row. Mother began to hurl accusations and reproaches at Olga Alexeyevna, but she didn't get very far. She shrivelled up, because what Olga Alexeyevna said next was like a dash of scalding water: 'While I live here this young man will continue to call on me. I want you to remember that.' And then she turned to me and said: 'You've lived the life of a coward long enough, Valya. Your mother was afraid that your hands would coarsen and your complexion would be ruined if you took a building job. But something much worse will happen to you if you stay on in this house. Your heart will turn hard and you'll forget you were ever able to blush. What are you afraid of? Who are you afraid of? The whole world is there before you. The whole world!'"

Valya fell silent.

"What happened then?" Zavyalov asked.

"I saw Vasya a few times, but he refused to come to our house. It made him sick, he said. I promised to marry him. But by that time Olga Alexeyevna had already left us. She moved into the new house built for the institute staff. I rarely saw her, the house is out of town somewhere. . . . Still, I was full of resolve to marry Vasya and get a job. Olga Alexeyevna's words 'the whole world is there before you' still rang in my ears. But little by little my mother's voice drowned them out. I did not go back to my husband—I had enough will-power for that, but then I was not strong enough to leave Mother. And here we are, left high and dry," Valya said with a bitter smile.

"And what about Vasya?"

"Vasya? He got sick and tired of waiting for me to make up my mind, of the endless postponements, and went away . . . he got a transfer . . . or perhaps . . . anyway, I don't know where he is now. He didn't even say goodbye to me. I don't blame him, though. Olga Alekseyevna has apparently forgotten me. But I remember her. . . . And today when I heard Mother saying those scandalous things about her—I stood behind the door—I had to clap my hands over my mouth to hold back my sobs, but I did not dare come in. I didn't have the courage. I get petrified every time I must face someone or walk out, I mean every time I must do something decisive. . . . Why, I don't know. . . ."

There was a knock on the door, and Zavyalov heard the now familiar voice of the receptionist.

"Comrade Zavyalov, there's a telephone call for you."

"Coming," Zavyalov called.

The telephone was in the manager's office on the ground floor. The receiver lay on the table.

"Hullo! Who's speaking?"

"I'm speaking from the Town Party Committee. There's a message for you from Comrade Lukashev."

"Yes, yes. I'm listening."

"Comrade Lukashev asked me to let you know that he has been delayed at the election meeting. He has not yet been able to do what you asked him. He will be back late, at about ten. He asked you to wait for him. He suggests you might have a look round the town and be sure to go out to Lake Tayozhnoye. It's only half an hour by bus."

"Very well," Zavyalov said in a crestfallen tone. "Certainly I'll wait for him."

He went upstairs. His door was open. Valya was gone.

Zavyalov took Lukashev's advice and went to Lake Tayozhnoye.

He had seen many lakes in his life but what he was looking at now was unlike any lake or river in flood

that he'd ever seen. A piercing cold rose from its surface.

Away to the right the dark shape of distant mountains veined with snow was discernible in the grey mist. The mountains were sinking slowly and steadily into the lake. Soon they seemed to be quite out of sight and nothing was to be seen except the cold, majestic sweep of water merging with the horizon.

Zavyalov knew there were many legends about Lake Tayozhnoye, that songs had been composed about it and that it could be as wild and stormy as the sea. But now it was calm and its surface as smooth as though it were covered with a film of ice.

Behind him stretched a line of single-storey timber cottages which evidently belonged to fishermen for nets were hanging over the garden fences.

The cottages stood on the edge of the taiga. Dense trees with intertwining branches and tall grass came right up to their back doors. These cottages and a narrow strip of asphalted road were all that lay between the taiga and the lake. Above hung a low grey sky.

Zavyalov walked slowly down the road. He remembered how two months ago (and it seemed years ago now) he was walking along a road like this—only it was beside the sea—and hurrying towards him came a woman in a shimmering red dress that clung to her body like fish scales. But he remembered it as something he once heard, as if it were someone else's experience and not his. Everything that had happened to him before seemed unimportant now, strange and distant.

Olga is here. Olga is here, he told himself repeatedly. The end of his long wanderings was in sight at last. This narrow road with the lake on the right and the impenetrable taiga on the left would lead him straight to Olga.

His spirits rose. He suddenly felt he could manage even without Lukashév's help—there lay the road, straight and clear as an arrow on a military map.



He walked on. The fishermen's cottages were left behind. Ahead of him lay only the taiga, the cold lake and the road running between them.

Some buildings vaguely outlined through the mist appeared in the distance. He decided to walk to them. They stood back from the road on a hillock or, perhaps, on artificially raised ground. He chose them as a landmark, as a point to which to walk. He would then turn back, for it was getting late, it was nearly six o'clock.

Half an hour later he drew level with the nearest building. He glanced at it absently and then almost shouted. The magazine page he always carried in his pocket had sprung to life before his eyes.

Of course, the people who were in that photograph were not there now. Nor was the snow, nor the setting sun. But there before him was the long, barrack-like wooden building he would remember all his life.

It couldn't be a mistake. It was the same building, perched on a hillock, a little apart from the others, and there was the path running up to it. He ran at the double up the path to the top of the hillock.

It was up here on this broad level stretch of ground that Olga had stood when the photograph was taken, he was quite certain. Yes, here it was. On one side of her there'd stood that old man in a coat with a fur collar, and on the other the woman in the fancy hat.

He knocked on the door and listened. No answer. Then he pulled the door open. It creaked a little. He stepped in and found himself in a long empty passage. To right and left were a number of evenly spaced doors as in a hotel. He cleared his throat loudly, then took a few steps along the passage, stamping his feet hard. Again he listened. Silence.

He looked into the nearest room. There was no one there. The room was unfurnished, except for an iron bedstead without a mattress.

He went into the next room. This too was empty. A few small wooden cases were stacked in one corner. A film of undisturbed dust covered the floor—no one had been there for a long time. The third room was

furnished in a sort of way: there was a table, a few stools, two beds with mattresses but no sheets.

Zavyalov stood in the passage, wondering what to think. What was this odd building? It reminded him of an abandoned dormitory.

"Is there anyone here?" he called loudly. He'd lost all hope of getting a response. Suddenly a door at the end of the passage opened and a man wearing pyjama trousers and a shirt with rolled-up sleeves came out.

"What are you shouting for?" he asked rather grumpily. "Who d'you want?"

Zavyalov felt so relieved that he did not notice the surliness in the tone of this elderly, grey-haired man.

"I'd already given up all hope of finding anyone here," he said, walking along the passage towards him.

"Who d'you want?" the man repeated impatiently.

"Would you tell me please what this building is? Who it belongs to?"

"It belongs to a branch of the Lake Hydrography Institute."

"Of the what?"

"The Lake Hydrography Institute," the man said, pronouncing each syllable with marked irony. Though he had the face of an old man his figure was youthful.

"And what does that mean?" Zavyalov asked. "What does that institute do?"

"It studies the hydrological basin, with your permission," the old man said, adding: "If you want a more detailed explanation you must address yourself to the head office. Excuse me, please."

He turned back to the door.

"Wait a moment," Zavyalov said hastily. "There's something I just have to know. . . I think this is the building I saw in a magazine."

"In a magazine? What magazine?"

"Never mind, it doesn't matter," Zavyalov explained hurriedly. "You see, I'm looking for someone who works. . . Are you sure this building belongs to that . . . er . . . that Lake Hydrography Institute?"

"Come in, come into my room," the man said with

unexpected cordiality. Pushing the door wide open he made a slight gesture with his hand.

Zavyalov saw a table covered with scribbled sheets of paper, an open ink-pot with a pen standing in it, a carelessly made camp-bed and, in a corner, some wooden boxes and canvas bags.

The old man showed Zavyalov to the stool at the table and sat down on the bed.

"Now then, begin from the beginning," he said. "What is this magazine you're talking about and what d'you want? You're not a tourist, I take it."

"A tourist?"

"We get a lot of them here. But you are evidently interested in something else."

Zavyalov repeated the story he had had to tell so many times before.

"... And so I came here by pure chance and saw this building and.... I'm terribly sorry. I think I've taken you away from your work." He nodded at the sheets of paper that lay untidily on the table.

"Well, now," said the old man after some hesitation. "You didn't make a mistake. This building really did belong to the institute you mentioned. They used it as a sort of club. Now, of course, it's all been rearranged."

"But where is the institute itself?"

"H'm," muttered the old man. "You told me yourself that you'd know something about it this evening."

"Yes, of course, I'm sorry...."

"You see, they used this building only temporarily. For a few months. They were moved here from Lenin-grad, I believe. Until their compound was built they lived in lodgings in town. We let them have one of our buildings to work in. Not this one, of course. They built this one themselves as a temporary club. We inherited it from them. We use it now as a sort of annex where we can put up parties going on lake expeditions."

The old man's voice became more cordial as he went on.

"I've one last question before I go," said Zavyalov. "You must have met the people working at the institute

during the months they were here. After all, you were neighbours."

"What's the name of the person you're looking for?" the old man asked.

"Mironova."

"Olga Alexeyevna Mironova?"

"You know her?"

"Olga . . . Olga Mironova," the old man said quietly, nodding meditatively.

"Is she here?"

"Yes, yes, of course she's here. Quite near here. It's only ten kilometres to the compound. But there's no regular transport. You need a permit. You'll get one, of course. Just imagine! Olga Mironova. . ."

Zavyalov looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. Lukashev would be back late. What should he do? Walk those ten kilometres and try to get into the compound without a permit? No, that was out of the question, a foolish idea. In three or four hours everything would be straightened out. Perhaps Lukashev would be able to arrange for him to go there that very night. And, of course, he'd get Olga on the telephone for him.

He was flooded with a vast, boundless joy, the like of which he had not felt for years. He'd found Olga, found her!

There was still time to ask this nice old man some questions about her. For the last—really the last—time he would be finding out things about her from others.

"When did you see her last?" he asked.

The old man didn't reply. He didn't seem to have heard the question. And something told Zavyalov that he must not press him for an answer.

He let almost a minute pass before he repeated his question.

"It's two months since I saw her last," the old man replied, assuming his dry, rather brusque tone again. "But that has nothing to do with it, nothing at all."

"Nothing to do with it? With what?"

"Look here," the old man said, ignoring the question. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Gladyshev, Konstantin Georgievich Gladyshev."

He offered Zavyalov a hand. Zavyalov shook it hard.

"And now we shall celebrate our meeting," the old man resumed. "The three of us."

"The three of us?"

"Why, yes. Olga, you and I."

He said it very simply, casually even. Giving Zavyalov no time to recover from the shock he silently left the room. A few minutes later he returned with a haversack on his back. He had changed his pyjama trousers for breeches, put on a pair of high boots and rolled down his shirt sleeves.

"Let's go," he said in a voice that brooked no denial.

## 21. PICNIC IN THE TAIGA

**T**hey skirted the building and soon found themselves in the forest.

At once they were in semi-darkness and the deeper they plunged into the forest the darker it became. Gladyshev strode ahead, silent, not looking back, confident that his companion would follow him obediently. Before long they came out on to a small glade. The trees, growing densely, with shrubs and tall grass at their feet, hemmed them in on all sides. Somewhere nearby an invisible stream gurgled. A patch of grey sky hung overhead, and across it the wind chased ragged clouds.

"Here's the place," said Gladyshev, stopping. He dropped his haversack on the grass.

Squatting on his haunches he undid the haversack and took out a parcel.

"Here's the fish," he said, unwrapping two fair-sized trout. "And here are the potatoes," he continued in a business-like tone, putting his hand in again and bringing out a few potatoes. He produced salt, a saucepan, spoons and a bottle of vodka, naming each in turn. Smoothing the empty haversack, he spread it out to serve as a table-cloth.

"Got a penknife on you?" Gladyshev asked him. "No? Take this." He drew a big folding knife with a wooden handle out of his pocket. "Peel the potatoes and put them in the pot. There's water nearby. Know how to do it?"

"I'm an old soldier."

"All the better."

Why had he come here with the man? What on earth for? He should have thanked him when they were indoors and left. But it was too late now that they'd come all the way here. Besides he couldn't get rid of the thought that the old man's past was connected in some curious manner with Olga.

He picked up the pot and walked in the direction from which the sound of water came. He soon found the stream. It ran swiftly and noisily as if being driven by some hidden pump. The little pebbles in its bed spun topsy-turvily, and around the bigger ones the water foamed in angry swirls. He had to clamber down a rather high steep bank to get to the water. As he began his descent, clutching the pot with the potatoes in it in one hand and the knife in the other, he stumbled and only just prevented himself from rolling into the stream.

He swore. Why did he have to be doing all this? He ought to be hurrying back to town.

"Well, how are you getting on? Ready?" he heard Gladyshev shout.

"Coming!" Zavyalov called back and opening the knife hurriedly set about peeling the potatoes.

When he had peeled the first he wanted to wash it in the stream. The water was so cold that he jerked his hand out. But when he tried again it felt quite pleasant. It was a long time since he last sat like this beside a forest stream with his hand in the swift-flowing water. Not since he was a child, actually.

He pushed his way back through the undergrowth. He could smell the smoke from the campfire.

"Come on, bring 'em here," Gladyshev called out.

He hadn't wasted any time: while Zavyalov had been peeling the potatoes he had cleaned the fish, kindled the fire, driven two forked stakes into the ground and laid a stick across them to support the pot. Without looking round he held out a hand, took the pot from Zavyalov and hung it over the flames.

"Well, now," he said, dropping the fish into the

water. "That's pretty well all. You'll like my fish soup, I'm sure."

"Thanks, Konstantin Georgievich, but I'm afraid I've very little time," Zavyalov said. He had made up his mind at last. "I must get back to Taiginsk. Just imagine how you'd feel in my place. I can't waste any time. . . ."

"On sharing my fish soup with me, you mean?" said Gladyshev. "But I never thought of wasting your time for the pleasure of my company alone. I promised you we'd be three and I'm going to keep my promise."

"This smacks of mysticism, Konstantin Georgievich."

"Mysticism? Heavens, no! I'm a hydrologist, mine is the most prosaic profession in the world, and mysticism is not my province at all. Far from it, my friend. What I intend to tell you is the starkest reality. It almost cost me my life."

He fitted a spoon into a split twig and began to stir the soup.

"We are making a study of Lake Tayozhnoye," he said. "It's a unique lake, a very difficult one. You mustn't think we're simply engaged in all kinds of abstract speculations. Our job is to make a complex study of the lake. We are the ones who helped to work out the conditions and the hydrological regimen of this huge lake. Just let them try and build power stations without us!"

He paused.

"However, all that is quite beside the point," he continued with a smile. "It's my conditioned defensive reflex coming into play. We have tourists coming to us, you know. They listen to what we have to say and then ask politely: 'Tell us, please, what is the practical importance of your work? Of course, it's very interesting to know, say, the temperature of the water in the lake and how its chemical regimen is formed. But just what are the practical results?' We have to explain to them the usefulness of our work and how we help the artificial breeding of fish at the fisheries and how we mean to start a study not only of Lake Tayozhnoye but of all



the lakes and reservoirs in Siberia. But I've strayed from the point. Sorry. I meant to tell you something else. There is one indispensable condition for working here. You have to love the work. You may argue that the same is true of any useful job. Maybe so. Still, there *is* work you can do without loving it. But not ours. Otherwise why should people live for years on the uninhabited banks of rivers and lakes? For years, d'you understand? It's not a matter of going on an expedition, or taking some temporary assignment, long maybe, but temporary all the same. A whole lifetime of wind and snow and ice. A whole lifetime with nothing but water and ice to look at. That's something you either love or hate. Those who hate it don't come here. We get the ones who love it. The ones who aren't afraid of wind, who don't complain that they have to dip their hands in icy water, who don't get seasick—for after all we have to go out on the lake in launches for days on end. Anyway, that's what I thought until Andrei Andreyevich Zvyagintsev came to work with us. He was a hydrologist who was planning to write a paper on Lake Tayozhnoye. You see, I live here alone. My wife, my companion on all my journeys through life, died five years ago. Well, they put Zvyagintsev in my room to keep me company. The idea was mine really. . . ."

Zavyalov listened in perplexity. What on earth could all this have to do with Olga? he wondered. He glanced at his watch and Gladyshev noticed it and said:

"You're puzzled, I see," he said. "Be patient a little longer. Olga will appear in good time." He looked into the pot where the water was beginning to boil, and resumed: "This Andrei Andreyevich was a strange man. Even now, after all that's happened, I couldn't say quite definitely what sort of person he was. No, I'm wrong there. I do know now. But at that time I liked him a lot. The rest of us had known each other for years and years, we got used to each other's company. And he was fresh from town, from Sibirsk, so well-groomed and smart, a sort of mother's boy, happy and young—he was no more than thirty-two. Well, sharing a room we

soon got to know each other. By the second day I knew he'd left college seven years before and had gone to work at the regional hydrometeorological station. That, really, was his whole life story. And, as I said, I got to know it very quickly. At first the beauty of these parts delighted him. You know how it is, of course: local people like to sound a bit mysterious, they talk a lot about the secrets of Lake Tayozhnoye, about its grim nature, they call it an inland sea and so on. Zvyagintsev knew all that very well. He never missed an opportunity to wax enthusiastic about the lake. And that was something else we liked about him. We old-timers had long since lost the habit of going into raptures about what you might call the purely decorative features of the lake—we left that for the tourists. But at the same time it pleased us no end that here was a fellow specialist who was still as keen and impressionable as a youngster.

"I don't remember how it all started. Perhaps it was when he asked me if I thought he might curtail his schedule of work on his paper and do it in one year. Otherwise, he said, he'd be stuck in this place for two whole years. He said it so sincerely that I find it hard to convey to you how I felt. There was such a wealth of meaning behind his words. First, it followed that we were all 'stuck in this place' but that it was quite natural for us primitive and moss-grown old fossils to be here. For him, though, the prospect of staying here even temporarily was unbearable. Second, his words meant that the only thing he was interested in was his paper. And even that interested him only because it would get him his Master of Science degree. I listened to him and thought: What a strange young man! What was he really like? Was he naïve or simply stupid, so stupid that he didn't realise how offensive the idea behind his remark was for all of us? Or was he such a snob that it never occurred to him that we could question his superiority, his right to a special position and a different kind of life?

"And then the even flow of our days was disturbed

by the arrival of the institute you're looking for. Incidentally, as far as I know it wasn't the entire staff of the institute, only one part of it, a laboratory. They were doing a hush-hush job and the building they did it in was fenced off. But secrets or no secrets, we were all thrown together in these wild parts; we often met at the club too. One day Zvyagintsev asked me if I would mind his bringing a visitor to the room. That evening he came with a young woman whose coat was obviously not of local cut though she was wearing clumsy felt boots. We shook hands and she told me her name. It was Olga Alexeyevna Mironova."

Gladyshev picked up the twig with the spoon affixed to it, dipped it into the pot, blew on the soup, tasted it, and shook his head.

Zavyalov was on his guard. He felt as though someone was pressing down hard on his shoulders. He leaned forward, afraid of missing a word.

"She took off her coat," Gladyshev resumed. "I hadn't seen such an attractive woman for a long time. Not even the felt boots spoiled her appearance. She had big earnest eyes and wore her hair brushed straight back. It must sound funny to you to hear me talking about her like this—after all, I'm sixty-four. But I couldn't help noticing how attractive she was. I'll go further: it seemed to me quite natural to see them together, Olga Alexeyevna and Zvyagintsev. Don't be angry, I'm telling you everything just as it happened. They were both young and good-looking. I don't remember whether I told you we had a good many women working on our staff. But either we'd been seeing too much of each other or perhaps our work—being on the water or the ice all the time—does leave its mark on our outward appearance, anyway, as I said, I found it natural that Andrei Andreyevich should have come in with a woman like Olga Alexeyevna. She sat with us for a little while. I made tea. Later Andrei Andreyevich saw her to the bus stop—she was still living in town then. He came home excited, in high spirits. 'Did you like her?' he asked

me. 'Well, yes,' I replied. 'Very much, I must confess.' He started to talk about her—what a splendid life she'd had—she was in the Air Force during the war and had two combat decorations, yet she was so feminine, so soft and gentle. . . . Well, you know the things a man says when he likes a woman."

Zavyalov frowned and made a gesture as if to ask why must he be told all this? But Gladyshev either did not notice it or pretended not to.

He tossed some sticks on to the fire and continued: "What I've just told you happened in February this year. Some time later news of what had taken place at the Party Congress in Moscow began to percolate to our backwoods here and then when that document, you know which one I mean, was read to us we could talk of nothing else. My work always kept me a long way from big towns, usually in small compact groups of people. Neither I nor my wife suffered directly from the personality cult if you think of it in terms of lawlessness and repression. But I welcomed the decisions of the Congress with all my heart and soul because they did more than put an end to lawlessness, they opened the way to a new life for the people. I understood, I felt that something new was coming into my life too. But Andrei Andreyevich Zvyagintsev took the decisions of the Congress in an altogether different way. Even before then he'd lived as if someone was always spurring him on. Not from the point of view of work, but—well, how shall I put it? He always seemed to be haunted by the fear that he was missing something, that he was wasting more time than necessary on something he considered temporary, transient. He spent many an evening telling me feelingly that we were living in times when all roads lay open to people of talent, that there wasn't a moment to waste and that he envied Olga Alexeyevna because the job she was doing was so important, and the government was paying so much attention to it. He wanted to be done with his work on his scientific paper as quickly as possible. I listened to him carefully and tried to understand something I

simply couldn't grasp. What did he mean when he spoke of his future which would begin after he was "done" with his paper? At times it seemed to me, though I tried to tell myself I was wrong, that he was in such a hurry not because he was eager to get on with some new, important work, his life's cause, shall I say, but because he didn't want to be late in getting his slice of cake which was available to all now. He was afraid he might miss his chance of getting at it before others had eaten it all. What jarred on me too was that when he was talking so enthusiastically about Olga Alexeyevna's work it wasn't because of her bravery or devotion—after all, we knew that she was risking her life by working on those new kinds of fuel. What impressed him about it was that her work was, so to say, given the highest priority by the state. I admit that at that time I was still on good terms with Zvyagintsev and didn't want to read anything bad into his words or ideas. I tried to convince myself that it was only natural for a young and energetic man like him to want to forge ahead so fast. A man needed to have a special kink or be an old fellow like me to willingly give up his life to work in a godforsaken place like this, and, what's more, enjoy it.

"And then I did something I shall never forgive myself for—I began to help him write his paper. It wasn't just a matter of talking over scientific problems with him or sharing with him the fruits of my many years of experience. I actually wrote a lot of his paper for him. It sounds disgusting, I know, but perhaps you'll understand how I felt. I was quite alone. The fellow was half my age. He could have been my son. We shared a room. I had a fair amount of spare time. First I made a synopsis of a chapter for him. Then I wrote the detailed plan. I grew interested in the work myself—I'd never written scientific papers before, I had worked strictly on the practical side, and now I was developing my ideas on paper—and in forty years' work I'd collected some interesting observations. Zvyagintsev read it all. He told he'd have to forget

everything he'd read, get it out of his head—otherwise he'd find himself repeating my ideas in spite of himself. I tried to convince him that it was silly of him to worry about that—it wasn't important who got the idea first—the important thing was that it was being done in the cause of science, for the good of the cause and so on. In short, the situation became a farce. He put up a show of refusing my help, insisted on my stopping while I, for my part, insisted on continuing and persuaded him to make full use of the results. In the end we came to a tacit understanding. And thereafter he never sat down to work before he'd seen the notes I'd jotted down for him.

"Yes, I felt I had a new aim in life—the education of a young scientist. And there was something else of no little importance to me. I love the work I am doing. I believe that my comrades and I are doing something of great benefit to our country. However, I'm a practical worker—I don't pretend to be a scientist. But why shouldn't I help another man to become one and get a scientific work published, I asked myself. What did it matter whose name it appeared under? It would be all to the good to have another vigorous, ambitious propagandist of the study of rivers and lakes appearing on the scene. We'd all gain from it. The work I loved would benefit as well.

"I can tell that you're feeling annoyed with me for straying off the subject again," said Gladyshev with a grin. "There I go talking about myself instead of telling you about what is more important to you than anything else. But wait a bit, I haven't forgotten anything. . . . I often met Olga in those days. She was very nice to me and was always telling me how enthusiastically Zvyagintsev spoke about me, how much he liked me, how grateful he was to me, and so on and so forth. And as I knew that Zvyagintsev was fond of Olga and knew also—how could I help knowing, sharing a room with the fellow?—that their relations were not getting anywhere beyond the 'good friends'

stage, I too spoke as well as I could of him. I tried to get her more interested in him, old fool that I was.

"Well, now I'm coming to the end... The soup's ready, shall we have some first?" he said with a glance at the boiling pot.

"No, go on, go on please," said Zavyalov impatiently.

"Have it your own way. I think I've told you that in summer we organise scientific expeditions in motor launches and carry out our investigations with various instruments. Some of these expeditions, such as the study of the lake's bed, last several months. And in winter we go out on the ice—the lake freezes in winter, of course. We have plenty to do. We lower rotators through the ice to measure the speed and direction of currents, take the temperature at various depths, measure the intensity of the sun's rays penetrating the ice. And many more things.

"The expedition I'm now going to tell you about left in March. Zvyagintsev, Voronikhin, our hydrobiologist, and I. We were to live on the ice for a month or six weeks—till the spring, in short, when the ice becomes unreliable. Our comrades helped us to load a truck with cases of instruments, the equipment we required for a weather station, provisions and bedding. The truck was to tow the little hut on runners that would be our home. We said goodbye to our comrades. Olga Alexeyevna came to see us off. Very often an expedition like this goes hundreds of kilometres away from base. But we had a fairly simple task to perform, and were to be stationed two to three kilometres from the shore. When we got there we set up our hut and unloaded the truck. The truck drove off and left the three of us there on the ice.

"I don't have to tell you that when you are on that kind of expedition your only salvation is work. Otherwise you go off your head. It's always been as plain as a pikestaff to me—I really don't know what it is to be bored. I've taken part in dozens of expeditions like that over the years. But Zvyagintsev was a novice. So I tried to see he had as little spare time on his

hands as possible, except, of course, for sleeping. To begin with he was very eager and cheerful. He showed he had a knack for the work when we fixed up our hut to keep out the cold. We did it by simply lining it on the outside with chunks of snow which we then smeared with a mush of ice and water. Well, it took us all day to bore the ice holes, anchor our hut, set up the meteorological apparatus, drive a flag pole into the ice and hoist a flag on it. Early next morning we started our hard routine work. We spent over six weeks out there on the ice. And then it happened. . . .

"This was in spring, and it was not safe to remain on the ice. We had to pack up and get back to land. Early one morning our hydrobiologist Voronikhin went off to make arrangements for the truck to be sent for us and settle various other matters connected with our return. He was only gone a couple of hours when a high wind sprang up. D'you know what this wind is like in these parts? There are obviously far too many kinds of wind here. But the worst is the high wind that blows down from the mountains. It's something like the famous bora you get at Novorossiisk, ever heard of it? Usually it starts suddenly and reaches a tremendous force in a matter of seconds. I felt its coming at once. At first it was of quite moderate velocity—some fifteen to twenty metres a second—quite bearable. Of course, I'm speaking for myself—I'm used to everything, as I told you. But for a novice even the little surface wind that rises on the ice is pretty nasty. Can you imagine it: everything is blanketed in white mist and the wind howls and goes on rising and rising. As I told you, our expedition was not far out and in clear weather we could see the shore quite well, and from there the people could see us plainly, of course. For Zvyagintsev that was important psychologically, it steadied his nerves. But when the gale set in and the coast was blotted out by a mist of snow, when there seemed to be no one within hundreds of kilometres and there was the bottomless deep under our feet, then my companion's mood changed. He



turned glum and crouched in a far corner of the hut, watching the door nervously all the time as it shook under the gusts of wind, listening and only relaxing a little when he thought the wind was dropping. But I knew this was only the beginning and that after a short lull the gale would strike with redoubled fury.

"Of course, if we'd just sat on indoors we'd have been safe enough. But that was the point—we couldn't do that, we hadn't the right to. It was our duty to go outside at fixed times no matter what the weather was, enter the data recorded by the instruments in our log and take the essential measurements ourselves. Besides, in weather like that we had to leave our shelter more frequently than usual to see that all our meteorological equipment was secure and the tent over the ice hole was anchored properly. With Voronikhin away and, naturally, unable to return in that weather, there were only the two of us to do all this.

"The first time I did manage to get Zvyagintsev out of the hut. True, I felt very sorry for him, but I made him crawl over the ice to the instruments—literally crawl, because it was impossible to walk upright. It wasn't only because I couldn't have coped with the work alone that I made him go outside. I wanted to force him to overcome his fear by doing some hard work that needed complete concentration. Meanwhile the gale had reached enormous force. It carried away the tent in which we'd put up our rotators and barometers. This left us without any shelter, exposed to the wind when we lowered our measuring instruments through the ice hole. The metal seared our fingers like red-hot iron and when we got our hands wet the pain was unbearable.

"I looked round and couldn't see Zvyagintsev anywhere near. I shouted but the wind seemed to ram the sound back into my throat. I crawled back. I thought he must have got lost, but I couldn't find him. It was only when I got back to the hut that I saw him—sitting in his corner again.

" 'Why did you go back?' I asked him sternly.

"He didn't reply. He was breathing heavily.

"I repeated my question. This time he replied:

" 'To hell with it. I'm not leaving this place, again.'

" 'You are,' I said firmly. 'It's your duty and you've got to do it.'

" 'My duty!' he said, holding his hands dangling in front of his mouth and blowing hard on his fingertips. 'Are you joking or what? What duty? Dipping bits of iron in the water!'

"If he hadn't used those words 'bits of iron'—so incongruous on the lips of a specialist—I might have kept my temper. But that stupid phrase made my blood boil.

" 'They're not "bits of iron"! I shouted. 'They're the instruments you're supposed to have dedicated your life to working with. And it's your duty...'

" 'Duty! Duty!' This time he didn't attempt to conceal his sarcasm. 'Oh, stop using those barracks-ground words. They've gone out of fashion, I believe. Duty, duty! How many more things have to happen before people like you can free themselves from the spell of rhetorical phrases?'

"Yes, that's what he said. I remember every word.

" 'What do you want to do?' I asked him quietly.

" 'Go back to base,' he said. 'Can't you see that in an hour or so the hurricane will carry everything away? And don't forget it's spring now. The ice may start to shift under the pressure of this wind and then...'

" 'Are you thinking of walking to the shore in this weather?'

" 'Yes, I am. It's only about two kilometres away. We have a compass. If we take accurate bearings we'll get there somehow.'

" 'But I thought you weren't in a condition to go ten metres?'

" 'Go where? To that idiotic ice hole?'

"So he wasn't going to take a step to do his job but he was game enough for anything when it came to saving his own skin.

"I'd always thought that I was incapable of feeling such blazing anger. But in those minutes I wanted to knock him down, hit him, kick him in the face, I realised what kind of man he was. And although I could hardly keep my hands off him I said to him quietly:

"'You're a coward, a shabby coward, a deserter. As head of the expedition I order you to do your duty whatever that word means to you. We're going out to the instruments this minute.'

"'No, I haven't the strength. My hands are frost-bitten. I can't breathe in that gale. I've got bad lungs. I don't want to be ill the rest of my life.'

"'All right,' I said. 'But I'm warning you that when we get back to the base I'll tell the whole story. Including how you are writing your paper.' I stressed the word 'you'.

"He recoiled as though I'd hit him. Then he got up slowly and said in a crestfallen tone:

"'Why, Konstantin Georgievich, what's come over you? I had such a high opinion.... After all, you were the one.... I didn't expect.... You misunderstood me.... I really have got bad lungs ... you can look at my X-rays.... But if you insist I'll come with you, of course. I fully understand ... discipline and all that.'

"I crawled to the meteorological tower knowing that he was crawling behind me. I'd won. I'd forced him to come. Even though I'd had to threaten him. I was glad to think the gale was whipping him, beating his face, blinding him. It roared all around us. The high wind was howling, the ropes we'd stretched to secure the meteorological tower were humming furiously. Suddenly something struck me on the head.

"No, Zvyagintsev had nothing to do with it. Apparently the hurricane had torn down some pole or plank—anyway, some piece of wood or metal struck me on the head. Incidentally, I realised that only later, when I came to, or, perhaps, even some time afterwards.

"When I came to I found myself lying on the floor of the hut. I raised my hand to my head. A blood-soaked handkerchief lay on my forehead. I felt sick

and giddy. I think I must have passed out again. Then I came to once more. I was too weak to raise my head and look about me. However, I sensed I was alone. I put my hand out and felt around. I touched a tin mug which stood beside me on the floor, and then my fingers fell on a sheet of paper placed under the mug and I picked it up. It was a note from Zvyagintsev.

"I read it with difficulty. He wrote that I'd been badly hurt and he'd dragged me in, bandaged my head but, being convinced that I needed urgent medical attention, had decided to fight his way through to the shore in order to raise the alarm and save my life.

"He underlined the words 'fight his way'. I must have passed out again and when I came to I saw a woman leaning over me.... It was Olga Mironova.

"It was only later that she told me what had happened and why she had come. Hurrying to catch a bus after work she saw Zvyagintsev making his way slowly along the shore. He saw her too and, running to her, told her there'd been an accident, that I'd been hurt and was losing a lot of blood, that he'd somehow managed to get across to the shore and was now on his way to get help from the base. Realising that it would take some time to find a doctor and organise transport Olga suggested to him that he should report to the base immediately and then accompany her back across the ice. She added that she'd had some experience in dressing wounds: during the war when she was in hospital she had sometimes assisted the doctors. But Zvyagintsev told her the idea was senseless and that they ought to wait for a doctor. Besides, he said, he simply hadn't the strength to cross the ice again.

"Olga set out alone. She had seen our little camp from the shore on clear days and was certain it was quite near. How she managed to get through to me in that hurricane and snow mist, I don't know. But get through she did.

"I doubt if you're interested in the rest of the story so far as it concerns me. But I must tell you the part that concerns Olga. The point is not that I'd have bled

to death if she hadn't arrived. It's something else. I've already told you that Zvyagintsev was a very persistent admirer of Olga's and that to my shame I tried to bring them together. But now I saw it was my duty to do just the opposite—to warn Olga, to show her what he really was. So I told her everything.

"Now this is how things developed after that. When I left hospital and returned here, the first person I met was Zvyagintsev. Evidently he'd found out exactly when I would arrive. He congratulated me on my recovery and began to tell me in dramatic terms about how difficult it had been to get to the shore. He wanted to rub it in that to save my life he'd performed a feat of bravery. Scorning mortal danger he'd made the base and raised the alarm.

"I kept quiet. The sight and sound of him disgusted me. As far as I was concerned he'd ceased to exist. But he needed me very badly. Working up to it cunningly and referring to it as something quite preposterous he told me there were some nasty, compromising stories going round our station about his abandoning me, unconscious and bleeding, and not even troubling to use the first-aid kit we had in the hut. But surely it must be obvious to every clear-thinking person that the first thing that anyone would think of would be to hurry to the shore for help! He had no medical training. He had hastily bandaged me with the first thing that came to hand. In the stress of the moment he forgot there was a first-aid kit. And now Olga would scarcely nod to him, and there was talk among the staff. . . .

"At first I didn't take much notice of what he said. Then I grew more interested. He never said a word about the fight we'd had. He acted as if there had never been any quarrel. As if I didn't realise that my injury had been a way out for him, an excellent excuse for getting out. Or did he think the blow on the head had affected my memory?

"No, I soon realised what he was up to. He was banking on my kind-heartedness, on my decency.

He was one of those who consider a person kind-hearted only if he helps them. If people were honest and compassionate, if they were ready to help a comrade in distress, then, Zvyagintsev thought, they should first of all put themselves out for him. *He* had no obligations, not to anyone. But *they* had. That was the secret. He had the right to demand that people help him, love him, forgive him all his faults. But he himself was free to behave any way he liked. I still couldn't say for certain what his real motivation was—sober calculation or rash, utter egoism. He reckoned he had the right to go to a man who knew him to be no good and say with a sweet candid smile: 'Help me, do this for me.' As far as he was concerned the other man had no right to refuse. And so he came to me for help. And what d'you think he wanted me to do? He wanted me to arrange for the three of us to meet: Olga, him and me. He'd been waiting for me to come out of hospital to ask me. He'd forgotten all about his being in love with Olga. It didn't mean anything to him any more. All he wanted was to have his good name re-established, and it had to be done in her presence.

"'But what makes you think she'll come?' I asked him.

"'She promised,' he replied quickly. He'd told Olga that I was as good a friend of his as ever—he did not doubt it. And what about her? She'd smiled, he told me, and replied: 'Well, let's find out.'

"I guessed what she meant and so I agreed to do what Zvyagintsev wanted."

"Now listen," Gladyshev said, rising to his feet. "I promised you she'd be here with us, remember? Well, she stood here. In the very place where you're sitting now. Try to picture it and you'll see her. I stood where I am now. Zvyagintsev was tending the fire. We were picnicking in the taiga—an old Siberian custom. At first none of us said anything. Zvyagintsev behaved as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening, though he did fuss a bit too much. It was evening, like now.

We made some fish soup and ate it in silence. Then Zvyagintsev opened the bottle of vodka we had brought with us.

" 'Not just yet, Zvyagintsev,' Olga told him. 'I have to know with whom I'm going to drink. So let's talk this matter over.'

" 'Gladly,' he said, putting the bottle down. He gave her his usual candid, radiant smile, with perhaps just a touch of sadness in it, and said: 'This picnic was my idea, friends. It's a long time since we three spent an evening together. D'you remember the last time, comrades?'

" 'We didn't say anything.

" 'I'd like this evening to be as pleasant and happy as all the others we've had together. But if it is to be like that, then some suspicions have to be dispelled first. Let me say a few words on that subject. I believe the times when foul rumours and vague suspicions were enough to cripple a man for life are past. I hope those times have gone never to return. You agree with me there, of course?'

" 'Yes, of course we do,' said Olga.

" 'I never doubted it. Then you must agree that I have the right to want to put down the false rumours that have gathered round my humble person. Why d'you think I chose you two for this talk? Because you, Konstantin Georgievich, are my friend and comrade, a man I trust implicitly and before whose authority I bow. As for you, Olga Alexeyevna, I. . . '

" 'He half-closed his eyes and stopped.

" 'Cut out the embroidery, Zvyagintsev,' Olga said sharply, even rudely.

" 'All right,' he went on with a shrug. 'I'll get straight to the point. Let me ask you a few questions. First you, Konstantin Georgievich. Was I with you when you crawled through the blizzard to the meteorological tower?'

" 'Yes,' I said.

" 'Who got you back to the hut when you were injured?'

"'Considering there were only two of us there, obviously you.'

"'Did you read the message I left? It was at your side under a mug.'

"'Yes.'

"'Were you in need of medical assistance?'

"'Evidently.'

"'Do you agree with me that getting to the shore alone in that blizzard was a very dangerous business?'

"'When a man thinks it's a matter of life!...' I began. But Zvyagintsev cast me an imploring, though slightly threatening look and cut me short:

"'It was a matter of your life. What d'you mean—"thinks"? Now I have a question for you, Olga Alexeyevna. I met you on the shore. That's right, isn't it? Why don't you answer?'

"'Listen, Andrei Andreyevich,' Olga said, looking him straight in the eye, 'why are you putting on this act? Question—answer, question—answer. Yes, I met you on the shore. Go on.'

"'I'm sorry,' he said with embarrassment, 'but I thought it would be easier this way. As a matter of fact, I've almost finished. Just one more question. You knew that after I got back to the base and told them what happened I collapsed on the spot and was kept to my room for a fortnight with a severe chill?'

"'I confess I didn't know that.'

"'People told me afterwards that you were among those who went to help Konstantin Georgievich,' Zvyagintsev said rather timidly, pretending not to notice Olga's sharp tone. 'That means you can confirm that he had to have immediate medical attention. And it was I who organised it, you know. Those are the facts. Do you agree?'

"'We said nothing.'

"'That being so, why don't either of you speak out for everyone to hear?' Zvyagintsev exclaimed dramatically, encouraged by our silence. 'Why don't you two, who know more than anyone else, speak up and put an end to the foul rumours? It's being said that I



abandoned an injured man, that I didn't go back with the doctor and the others to show them the way. But who could remember the way in that blizzard? I got back to the shore by instinct, I crawled there blindly. . . . And I collapsed as soon as I got to the base. And yet you, you who know the facts, say nothing!' He smote the air with a gesture of righteous indignation and turned his back on us."

Interrupting his story Gladyshev said to Zavyalov:

"I expect you remember the last words Nero is supposed to have said before committing suicide: 'What an actor dies with me.' I felt like repeating those words when I looked at Zvyagintsev. He was a great impersonator. Apparently he believed what he said or at least he did when he was saying it. As I listened I thought: What, really, could he be accused of if you looked at it from a strictly legal point of view? An open examination of his behaviour suited him down to the ground. The only person who was in a position to tell the compromising truth was me. But, of course, he was sure that I, the man who had not sent him about his business the first time we met after my return, and who had moreover agreed to attend this picnic in the taiga, was going to hold my tongue. Perhaps he thought I'd feel sorry for him, that I'd be too squeamish to talk, or perhaps he thought a false notion of decency would keep me from talking—the devil only knows why but he was sure I'd keep silent.

"Well, Zvyagintsev turned away but even just looking at his back made me sure he had real tears in his eyes. Then Olga spoke. He swung round the moment he heard her voice.

" 'I've no legal experience, Andrei Andreyevich,' she said quietly. 'I've been to only one trial in my life and that was a court martial. They were trying a deserter. He was sentenced to death and shot. It was a short fair trial. I remember another trial, quite different—that was after the war—when I had to give evidence. . . . Not a pleasant memory, that. And that really is all. So I prefer straightforward conversation to formal inter-

rogation. However, you told us that questions and answers suited you better. All right, let it be your way. I have a question to put to you. When you left Konstantin Georgievich you were in a great hurry to get to the shore and reach the base, isn't that so?

"Zvyagintsev stood leaning towards Olga in a pose that emphasised his readiness to answer any question she put to him.

"'Of course,' he said.

"'Then tell me, why were you walking away from the base?'

"'What's this?' I asked myself. 'Wasn't he going for the doctor?'

"'Think hard,' Olga went on. 'You know you were walking towards the bus stop, in other words, away from the base. Isn't that so?'

"Zvyagintsev shrugged.

"'There must be some misunderstanding here,' he said. 'I was simply tired, worn out, in fact quite frozen, and when I reached the shore it took me some time to get my bearings.'

"'All right. One more question—when I reached the hut on the ice I found Konstantin Georgievich bleeding profusely. Why did you leave him without bandaging his head properly?'

"'But I told you,' Zvyagintsev said in a gentle but insistent manner as to a difficult child. 'I used the first thing handy. A handkerchief I think it was. Besides, Olga Alexeyevna, the doctor will be a better judge than you.'

"'When I got there,' Olga went on calmly, 'the doctor hadn't arrived. He came two hours later.'

"'When you got there?' Zvyagintsev repeated in bewilderment. 'But where was the doctor? Didn't you all cross the ice together?'

"'Olga Alexeyevna crossed the ice alone,' I said, breaking in.

"'Alone?' Zvyagintsev repeated, even more puzzled. 'D'you mean to tell me that after speaking to me she set out alone through that terrible blizzard?'

"He was utterly confused. He shifted his gaze from Olga to me and back to Olga. He couldn't believe it, he couldn't imagine anyone doing anything so heroic without any benefit for himself.

"Tell me, Zvyagintsev," Olga said slowly, taking a pace towards him. "Would you have been very upset if Konstantin Georgievich had died?"

"Now they were standing on opposite sides of the smouldering embers of the fire. I looked at Olga and saw something in her face that frightened me. It was always so kind, so gentle and young, and now she suddenly looked aged and hard. Her big, childlike eyes in which the red, flickering light of the dying fire was reflected were narrowed.

"...I don't understand the meaning of that strange question," Zvyagintsev said falteringly. "Naturally, it would have been awful for all of us, myself included, if he'd died. . . . Specially for me."

"Why specially for you?" Olga asked harshly. "Hasn't Konstantin Georgievich already done about everything you wanted him to do for you? Wasn't it, perhaps, high time for him to disappear from the scene?"

"My hands turned numb. I'd only just realised that up to that moment Zvyagintsev hadn't known that Olga had crossed the ice alone. He hadn't known till then that Olga and I had been alone in the hut until the doctor arrived. He hadn't known I'd had time to tell her everything. Everything.

"He made an effort to pull himself together. In a flash the bewildered expression vanished from his face. Now he looked hurt, disappointed and wronged.

"He turned angrily to me and in a voice ringing with resentment cried: 'You rotter!'

"Believe me," Gladyshev said to Zavyalov, "if you'd been there at the time, watching us from somewhere near without knowing the truth of the matter, and had heard the note of sincere indignation and wrath in his voice when he said those words, I'm quite sure you'd have believed he was in the right. Besides, I'm

sure that at that moment Zvyagintsev sincerely believed I was a rotter. He'd feel that way about anyone who dared stand up to him. He was childishly vain and self-centred, prepared to do anything short of murder. Perhaps he wanted to say more, but Olga Alexeyevna ordered him to be silent in a voice that cut like a whip. It wasn't the voice of the Olga I knew. And it wasn't Zvyagintsev she saw standing in front of her but a deserter facing a court martial.

"'You're not even a man. You're just scum,' she said in a voice that sounded strangely calm and toneless. 'You made use of Konstantin Georgievich's knowledge and experience, you used his kindness for your own ends. You meant to run away and leave him, an old man, alone on the ice. You didn't dare run away earlier, because you were afraid of him. But you had a stroke of luck: he was injured and that gave you a plausible excuse to desert your post. You wanted to get away as quickly as you could to save your own hide. When you reached the shore you didn't go to the base—you began to walk in the opposite direction, so no help would be sent for as long as possible. You hoped he'd lose so much blood that by the time the others reached him he'd be beyond help. You were certain no one would blame you, for who could know how long it had taken you to get to the shore over the ice? You were pretty sure that none of your institute staff would be out on the shore in such weather. You met me by sheer chance.'

"He listened to her with a look of horror on his face. I thought she was exaggerating. I couldn't believe that Zvyagintsev had deliberately done all the things of which she was accusing him. Perhaps a mean little thought had lurked at the bottom of his cowardly soul that the accident to me could serve as a wonderful way out for him. But to believe that he had deliberately abandoned me to bleed to death, that he had tried to keep help from being sent out to me—no, that I couldn't!

"But Olga Alexeyevna was merciless.

"'You started defending yourself by referring to the times we now live in,' she continued before Zvyagintsev could gather his wits and reply. 'What connection has that with you? You dismiss the things people are saying about you as gossip and idle talk. But it's the truth, the ugly truth. If times hadn't changed you would have been a person to fear. You would have been one of those who got people to write their theses and papers for them by sheer blackmail. Your work would have been done for you by people like Gladyshev, men who gathered their experience and knowledge grain by grain over the years; they froze on the ice; they were swept off their feet by gales; but they struggled up and carried on because they knew their duty. And you, your sort would have fed on them like leeches, sucking their brains. We know your ways. You go about sowing suspicion, fear and distrust in people everywhere. We've seen your sort. But, mark you, the days have gone when careerists could flourish here, there and everywhere. People can't be hoodwinked now, they've become more straightforward and outspoken. They won't tolerate anything false, they can soon spot the timeservers and the careerists. You made a mistake, Zvyagintsev, an unpardonable mistake for a clever schemer like you. You thought that your time had come. But it isn't yours. And in your heart of hearts you know it. You simply overestimated yourself and your histrionic abilities. You probably said to yourself: this is the time for brave, bold and honest people, and don't I fit into that category? I have everything it takes. I'm young, I agreed to bury myself here in this wilderness, I'm not afraid of difficulties, I'm dead keen on science and who can see what I'm really like inside? Who can tell me from the others, the really honest and brave people? But people did see the difference. They recognised you for what you are. It couldn't be otherwise. Because our times are not your times. We live in the times of the Gladyshevs, young or old. The times of honest people. Can you understand that? I know that all you're thinking

of now as you stand there is that I should go on talking. You want more time to gather your wits and wriggle out of this. I'm not going to let you do that. I'm not going to.'

"She picked up a stick from the fire. Drawing herself up, she swung it and struck Zvyagintsev with the glowing end.

"That's for Gladyshev', she cried, taking a step towards him.

"I ran towards him for I was sure he would defend himself, perhaps even hit back at Olga.

"But I needn't have worried. After the first blow he doubled up and reeled back, and when Olga came nearer and raised her glowing flail again he made a dash for that bush over there. There was a sound of snapping twigs and he was gone. . . .

"The next day he left these parts for good. . . ."

"Well, that's all I wanted to tell you," said Gladyshev. "I'm afraid I've kept you a very long time."

"No," said Zavyalov, staring fixedly at the grey embers of the fire.

"Nothing to be done about the soup now," said Gladyshev with a glance into the pot. "It's cold, and to warm up fish soup is plain sacrilege."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not at all hungry."

"Well then, perhaps we'll have a drink?" Gladyshev said with a smile.

He picked up the bottle of vodka.

"Frankly, I don't feel like it," said Zavyalov. "D'you mind? I have a feeling that I'm really seeing Olga. No, 'seeing' isn't the word. I don't know how to put it. . . . It's a feeling that she's here, near me. I'm glad you brought me here. . . . And the vodka might dispel the illusion. D'you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I do. But you seem sad when really you should be feeling happy. You've found her you know."

"No, I'm not sad at all. Well, perhaps a little. It's the thought that we weren't together all those years."

"You'll see her tomorrow. Remember me to her."

"Yes, yes, certainly I will. Someone else asked me to do the same."

"Oh well," said Gladyshev, "let's walk back."

He stamped out the embers, threw away the cold soup and folded his knife.

"That's that," he said, shouldering his half-empty haversack. "Off we go."

It took them only a few minutes to get back to the long wooden building on the hillock. Zavyalov saw Lake Tayozhnoye again. In the distance the mountains sank gently into the water. A rock rising above the surface reminded him of an enormous flat-iron. A solitary rowing boat lay still on the leaden water. In it stood a man holding a long oar suspended diagonally, the way boatmen hold their punt-poles in Chinese pictures.

They walked down to the road.

"It's only about a hundred metres from here to the bus stop," said Gladyshev. "Goodbye. We're not likely to see each other again."

"Don't be so sure," said Zavyalov. "All human paths cross, after all. What you have told me has made me even more convinced of that. Thank you."

"What for?"

"For telling me what you did. For Olga."

"She saved my life, Zavyalov. And perhaps something more than my life."

"What could be more precious than life?"

"Faith. Faith that life is worth living. That there are more good people in the world than bad ones. Well, goodbye."

Zavyalov walked on to the bus stop. Halfway there he turned and waved to Gladyshev. At the stop he turned again and watched him walk slowly away along the narrow road which ran like a ribbon, like a blade cleaving the taiga and the lake.

## 22. LUKASHEV KEEPS HIS PROMISE

Except for the conductor and a couple sitting on the front seat the bus was empty.

Zavyalov took the back seat so as not to intrude on the couple's privacy. He could not see their faces, only their backs. The boy had his arm round the girl's shoulders. Now and again he raised his hand and stroked her hair very gently and then she would lean her head back a little. They were in love and happy.

And Zavyalov, sitting alone on the back seat, was happy too. It was a bus for happy people. Zavyalov wished it would go more slowly so he could remain alone with his happiness longer. He felt like a runner who, having left the others far behind, already sees the tape ahead and knows that no one can now snatch victory away from him.

He was in no hurry because Olga was already at his side. They were sitting there together like those young lovers in front.

He spoke to her and she answered him. He alone could hear her voice. He alone. Time and distance no longer separated them. He was with her again. Not with his dream of her or her picture in that magazine, but with the living, flesh-and-blood Olga of today.

He felt happy. As happy as that first time he sat in a plane and took the joy stick in his hand. As happy as when he shot down his first enemy plane. As the time he saw Olga, there on a front-line airfield. As on the night when he lay beside her in the tall grass with the stars looking down on them. As on the day he first



found out she was alive, and he felt the warm wind on his face and realised that all life lay ahead. He was happy. Some day they would all gather together—Olga and he, Korostyleva, Sokolov, the Prokhorovs, mother and daughter, Osokin, Gladyshev. . . . Who else? Oh yes, Slava Filonov, the press photographer, and Pavel Shevlyagin, and those whom he couldn't recall now but whom he would remember when that happy day of reunion came.

He carried on a low, inaudible conversation with Olga. "We'll have a party, all of us. Would you like that?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, of course," she replied.

"Here on the shore of the lake, in the taiga, perhaps in that very spot you've been to and that I've just left. Or in Moscow at my place. . . ."

"Yes, yes," she said, "here in the taiga or in Moscow at your place."

"We still have a lot to think over, we must decide where we're going to live. You'd probably find it impossible now to live a quiet life in Moscow. Don't explain why, I know everything. . . ."

"I would, I'm afraid."

"But I'm an ex-pilot, after all. That's wrong, I'm still a pilot. I'll also live where the planes are. . . ."

"I know, I know everything."

"Nothing can ever part us. Now we're together for the rest of our lives. We've been separated too long, for too many cruel years. But those years have passed. We're living in new times, our times. They'll never come to an end, these times of ours, the times of honest people."

He raised a hand and, like that boy sitting in front, ran it slowly over her smooth hair brushed back from her brow. He felt the softness of it as she leaned back a little, like that girl.

Lukashev stood at the window, his back to the door. He turned when Zavyalov, panting hard—for he had

practically run all the way from the bus stop—entered the room.

"Take a seat, Vladimir Andreyevich," Lukashev said, nodding at a chair near the desk.

"I know everything, everything," Zavyalov cried joyfully, hardly able to control his excitement. "She's here, quite near here. You must have found out something too, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have," said Lukashev slowly. He seemed to be avoiding Zavyalov's eyes. "Sit down, please sit down."

To hell with sitting down! Couldn't the man understand that he had no time to lose, that every minute, every second was precious!

"You see," Lukashev began, but Zavyalov, happy and excited, cut him short:

"Don't drag it out, for heaven's sake. I know everything. There aren't any more secrets for me in this matter. I know everything. She's working on new types of fuel for the new engines. You see, I know all about it."

"So you know more than I can tell you," said Lukashev. He walked over to his desk and began to thumb through some papers lying there. He carefully pushed them aside and put some pencils and a pen into a plastic container. "They did their best to talk her out of the idea," he said, still avoiding Zavyalov's eyes. "There are very few women on that job. It requires a great deal of special knowledge. And courage. . . . She was offered a job in the lab. But she said she wanted to work on the engines, that her heart beat more steadily when she was beside a running engine. You've probably heard of that apparatus the medical minds have invented. It works precisely and rhythmically. They plug it in somehow or other to a tired human heart and the heart then starts beating normally, in unison with the apparatus. Perhaps Olga Alexeyevna was thinking of that. . . ."

"I know all that," Zavyalov interrupted. "I know much more about her than you do, a hundred, a thousand times more."

"In that case," said Lukashev, looking Zavyalov in the eyes for the first time, "you've got to know the end too. You're an airman, Zavyalov, and you know that certain materials, whether they're in a liquid or a solid state, do not only burn but explode..."

Seconds passed. Suddenly Zavyalov drew himself up and reeled back. Something like this had happened to him when an anti-aircraft shell exploded near his aircraft that first time and the bright flash momentarily blinded him.

The plane had shaken violently and for a fraction of a second he had been aware of nothing except the glare in his eyes and the din in his ears. He was young and inexperienced in those days and he'd instinctively shied away from the explosion and swung the joy stick over to the left. Rather, he only imagined that he'd shied away, for a man in the cramped cockpit of a fighter has nowhere to shy to. He was returning from his first combat mission led by the flight commander. They were flying in a clear, cloudless sky, there wasn't an enemy plane in sight, not a hint of danger in the sky, it seemed. But suddenly everything changed—they'd run up against a well-camouflaged nest of anti-aircraft artillery.

And now, as on that occasion, a solid mass of red light filled his eyes. Gradually the red glare began to disperse and the walls, the desk, the chairs took on their real shape. He saw Lukashev standing at his side and felt his steadying hand on his arm.

"Don't," he said and his voice sounded sharp and rude.

No, he told himself. There's some mistake here.

Involuntarily he said these words aloud. He spoke very calmly, as calmly as if nothing appalling had happened but just some slight, accidental misunderstanding. What had Lukashev said? And why? Ah yes, of course, he didn't know a thing, this young man who for some reason was holding his arm. He had telephoned somewhere, got in touch with someone, but he, Zavyalov, had only just come from the place where

Olga had been standing so recently. He'd clear everything up in a moment, as soon as the room stopped rocking, as soon as the indicators on the control panel dials steadied, as soon as the aircraft found its level. In a moment everything would come back to normal, everything would be all right. And then he'd ask. . . .

No, there was no need to ask. He wasn't going to ask any questions. He would leave the room. Then he'd come back. He wasn't really standing there now, it was an illusion. Everything would pass in a moment. Lukashev must have made a mistake. There was no need to ask him anything. That could lead only to more mistakes. And then it would be too late to put anything right. No, no, there was no need to ask. He would go to Olga himself. She was there.

He took a step to go.

"When did it happen?" he asked.

"Two months ago. Before I came here. They were conducting a very difficult and important test. Olga Alexeyevna's comrades say that with the fuel she was working on a rocket could be fired to a height of hundreds of kilometres."

"The explosion was totally unexpected," Lukashev said after a pause. "Such things always are. . . ."

Both men stood in silence.

"But . . . but, how can it be?" Zavyalov said at last. "It means that when I saw her picture in the magazine she was already dead. And when Sokolov . . . Osokin . . . and just now, that Gladyshev . . . she was already dead?"

No, no, no, stop it, you fool. You're asking questions again, and yet you know that if you ask one more question you'll kill her. Kill her for ever. Don't ask, go, run away, back to the clearing in the taiga where the embers in the fire may still be glowing. . . .

"It happened on the twelfth of May, Vladimir Andreyevich," Lukashev said in a quiet yet resolute voice. "She died at her post. She was buried beside some other of those heroic people whose names for the time being have to remain unknown to us. Did you get my telephone message at the hotel?"

"Yes," said Zavyalov tonelessly.

"I had already found out everything, but I couldn't bring myself to tell you over the phone. That would have been too cruel. I asked you to go to Lake Tayozhnoye. Have you been there?"

"Yes."

"When you were telling me about your search and mentioned a long wooden building I realised that you were referring to the place the institute had used as a club once. I wanted you to see it. Did you?"

"Yes, I went there. I spoke with a man who knew her."

"I wanted to postpone this moment as long as I could. I wanted to give you a chance of feeling her living presence, if only that. That was all I could do, friend. Forgive me."

"Forgive you? What for?"

"For not being able to bring you good news. Every cloud has a silver lining, they say, and it would seem that whatever the news one could communicate it in such a way that the silver lining would be uppermost, that is if one really wanted to, did not spare oneself, and went about it boldly and honestly. But, as you see, there is a limit to what one can do. . . ."

He put his hand on Zavyalov's shoulder.

"Thank you," said Zavyalov. "You've nothing to blame yourself for. And, anyway, delivering notifications of death is not part of your duties."

"It is," said Lukashev slowly. "Yes, it is. Are you going back to Moscow?"

"Yes, by the first plane."

"You told me about all those people you met on your way to Olga Alexeyevna. You said you would never forget them. Think of me sometimes too, will you?"

"I will," Zavyalov replied mechanically.

"I understand what she meant to you when you started your search."

What was there to understand? Everything could be summed up in two words: yes and no. Yes was a bound-

less field, as boundless as the sea. No was like a wall. He'd run up against the wall. And that's all.

"I didn't know what to do when they told me about her death," Lukashev went on. "I wondered how I was going to break the news to you. And then I thought. . . . D'you know what I thought? That if I'd left my office a little earlier this morning I'd never have met you. Just that. You see, I'm not hiding anything from you. But then I began to think of how I was going to tell you the news. All the time I was sitting at that election meeting I saw you before my eyes and hated myself for not being able to find the right words. . . ."

"Words mean nothing to me. Can't you understand that?"

"... And suddenly I saw myself in your place," Lukashev continued, ignoring the interruption. "And then I realised what that woman meant to you. She was your dream. Your love. A little island that you'd lost. You did everything to establish the whereabouts of that island, you were bent on finding it, on getting there, whatever the cost. At first there was only she and you and no one else between you. Isn't that how it was, Zavyalov?"

Zavyalov did not reply.

"You probably think that you started your search simply because you loved her," Lukashev resumed. "Of course, that was the reason. But perhaps there was something else too. Perhaps you wanted to make a fresh start, to enter a new phase in your life in which the main principle was fidelity to a cause you believed in. Honesty. Clarity of purpose. . . . Surely you won't turn away from life only because the woman you were trying to find, the woman who had been travelling along the same road as you, had perished before reaching the end? She no longer exists, she did perish, but her heart goes on beating among thousands of other hearts. While you are alive she is alive too. While those others live, she will live. And she will go on living when we are dead. Just as others will continue to live after us. Perhaps I'm not saying the right thing. Probably I ought

to be saying something quite different—offering you a glass of water, sending for the doctor just in case you need one and telling you: 'Chin up, pilot. No matter what happens, a man must live and work.' But I'm no good at offering consolation. Perhaps I haven't acquired the habit yet. I'm still a young Party secretary. . . . So you're taking the morning plane?"

"Yes, the morning plane."

"Is there nothing more you'd like to tell me?"

"No. Oh yes, there is. 11 Karl Marx Street. The girl's name is Valya."

"What girl? Valya who?"


"She needs help. Have a talk with her and you'll know yourself."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

## FROM HERE TO THE STARS

(*By Way of an Epilogue*)

 ne autumn morning in 1957 the first man-made earth satellite was launched by the Soviet people.

Immediately radio stations throughout the world interrupted their regular programmes to announce to all mankind that a new era had begun.

The Russian word *sputnik* became known in many tongues, and it did not occur to anyone to ruin its charm by translating it into a foreign language. Sputnik is sputnik in all languages. For all people.

Another event took place that day. Only a few people knew of it. Yet for Pavel Shevlyagin this moment was as enormous as the world itself. That morning Pavel, a trainee at the Moscow Flying Club who had just finished a course of theoretical studies, was to take to the air for the first time in a YAK-18 training plane. On the previous day he had gone through the "preparatory exercise" specified in the regulations, again listened to the instructor and answered his questions.

At eight in the morning, he was to have one more talk with the instructor, go through the exercises known as "pre-take-off" and then, putting on his parachute harness, climb into the cockpit.

Zavyalov also regarded the event as far more serious than the routine taking up of a novice on his first flight. For a year now, since last autumn, he had been a flight instructor, and in all that time he had not addressed a single word to Colonel Simonyuk, head of the personnel department. When the time came for Zavyalov to go through all the formalities again in his



new capacity, Simonyuk was sure he would say something. But he merely filled in the required forms, signed them, and walked out without a word.

He learned of the launching of the sputnik early that morning when he was in the train on the way to the aerodrome. Pavel was waiting for him on the platform. The moment he saw Zavyalov he rushed to him shouting: "Sputnik, sputnik!"

They walked along the country road from the station to the aerodrome. Pavel chatted without a pause. He knew all the figures and data given in the TASS announcement by heart. He repeated them over and over again, tossing questions at Zavyalov and failing to notice in his excitement that his instructor, a man closer to him at this moment than anyone else on earth, was strangely silent and preoccupied.

"What's wrong, Vladimir Andreyevich?" he asked at last, with a twinge of panic. "Am I not . . . not going to fly today?"

"Don't worry. You're going to fly all right," Zavyalov replied quietly.

"You're going to fly," he repeated more loudly.

These words were enough to make Pavel's happiness complete again.

They saw Simonyuk standing at the gate.

"Zavyalov, have you heard the news? We've launched a sputnik!" Simonyuk shouted when Zavyalov and Pavel were still some distance off.

Zavyalov made no response. But as they walked past Simonyuk he said something to him so quietly that even Pavel, who was not two steps away, did not catch the words.

Simonyuk did, though. "Why should *you* care, Simonyuk?" Zavyalov had said, breaking his silence for the first time since that day when he swore there would not be a "next time".

Zavyalov and Pavel crossed the green flying field. They could hear a loudspeaker through the open windows of the club headquarters. The announcer was rereading the news about the launching of the sputnik.

An atmosphere of great excitement reigned near a checkered van. Here, at the command post for the take-off, everyone had gathered—trainees, instructors and the staff of the aerodrome. They met everyone who came towards them from the gates with a chorus of "sput-nik, sput-nik", keeping it up until the last of those who were expected that day had arrived.

A flying club official announced the start. Zavyalov and Pavel walked over to the green training plane they were to take up.

The sun glittered on the plexiglass cockpit canopy. A mechanic reported to Zavyalov that the aircraft was in fully airworthy condition.

"Shall we start, Shevlyagin?" Zavyalov asked.

They stood beside the plane. Two green pillow-like bundles lay on the grass at their feet—their parachutes.

"Listen, Shevlyagin," Zavyalov launched on the traditional pre-flight instructions. "I'm going to handle the take-off myself. You'll take the joy stick in your right hand and place your left hand on the throttle, putting your feet on the pedals. Until your turn comes just hold on gently to the joy stick and watch."

He stopped abruptly. Pavel didn't seem to be listening to him. His attention was obviously wandering, and that was impermissible during pre-flight instruction.

Zavyalov raised his voice and tried to speak with more insistence.

"During the second turn concentrate on the general view of the aerodrome. You must, as it were, photograph it with your eyes. Then you'll tell me everything you've noticed. After the first turn—that'll be when we circle the aerodrome for the second time—I shall give you the joy stick. Trainee Shevlyagin, what are you looking at?"

But even that sharp question did not bring Pavel out of the strange state he was in. There he stood, a little fellow with a sharp-pointed nose, in a blue flying suit, with his helmet in his hand, staring at something over Zavyalov's shoulder.

"I can see it . . . I can see it . . ." he whispered.

"What are you talking about? What can you see?"

"The sputnik. . . . Look, Vladimir Andreyevich, look! D'you see that silvery point, d'you see it?"

Zavyalov turned and looked in the direction where Pavel was now pointing.

But Zavyalov saw nothing. Nothing except the horizon—a blurred line in the early morning haze, and the rain-washed bright green woods.

"The announcer said you could see it with the naked eye," Pavel went on as if in a daze. "I can see it, I can see it. Look. . . ."

"I can't make out anything," Zavyalov said impatiently. "You couldn't see it in the daytime anyway, not in bright sunlight."

"No, no," Pavel interrupted with passionate insistence. "Look, look, there it is. Can't you see it? A little silvery dot. Like the head of a pin . . . sailing over the horizon. There it is, there it is!"

"Where, where?" Zavyalov shouted, Pavel's excitement communicating itself to him. He strained his eyes till they hurt, trying to spot the invisible silvery dot that Pavel saw so distinctly.

And now he thought he saw it. Yes, yes, there it was. A little silvery dot. A tiny white-hot spark was floating over the horizon. He could see it, he could see it! An invisible, irresistible force was driving on that marvelous spark, that incandescent piece of metal. No, of course he couldn't see it, it was no more than an optical illusion. But the harder he tried to persuade himself the more distinctly he saw the silvery dot floating so triumphantly over the horizon. And in his imagination it was no longer a little dot, it was a flaming sphere out of which tongues of flame and shining gas burst as from the turbines of a jet plane. In vain he told himself that he was imagining things, that the rocket had only put the sputnik in orbit and now the sputnik was moving by itself governed by the laws of astronautics, and that he couldn't possibly be seeing flames.

The emotions he had experienced in the train when he heard the first news of the sputnik returned. He

thought about Olga, only about Olga perishing in the flames that would light the way to the stars.

The thought came to him that it was her life, the strength of her hands, the beating of her flaming heart that propelled the silvery dot sailing over the horizon. She had not perished. She had not burned. She would victoriously orbit the earth and be seen from everywhere.

"Can you see it?" cried Pavel.

"Yes, yes."

"Anything wrong?" Zavyalov heard a puzzled voice.

He turned round. It was the mechanic.

"What can you see up there, Comrade Instructor?" he asked, shielding his eyes from the sun with his palm and looking into the sky.

"Nothing really," Zavyalov said in a hollow voice. "Shevlyagin thought he could see the sputnik."

"Oh, you can't see it by daylight," said the mechanic with a grin. "The time to look for it is in the early morning, at 6.42. Or at 1.46." He was quoting the TASS announcement.

Zavyalov's and Pavel's eyes met. They smiled at each other as if they shared a secret and felt proud of having seen something that no one else had yet seen.

"Inspect and put on your parachute kit," Zavyalov ordered.

He followed Pavel's movements closely as the boy slipped an arm through a strap of the parachute harness as confidently as a man putting on an overcoat, and heaved the bundle, held together by a few white elastic bands, on to his back. Then he slipped his other arm in, passed two straps between his legs and fastened the buckle on his chest.

"Get on board," said Zavyalov.

Pavel put his right foot on the metal step, swung himself up to place his left foot on the little ribbed square of aluminium on the wing and in a second dropped into the front seat in the cockpit—the trainee's seat.

Zavyalov sat behind him. Now he couldn't see Pavel's face—only his shoulders, the back of his head covered with his black flying helmet and a thin strip of sunburnt neck between the edge of the helmet and the collar of his flying suit. He couldn't see Pavel's eyes but he knew they were glued to the instruments on the control panel which a pilot must watch constantly during flight.

He could imagine how determined Pavel was to succeed in taking in all those readings at one glance during flight while at the same time following everything that was happening on the ground—something that no airman had ever managed to do the first time up.

Zavyalov smiled. Once again he glanced at the narrow stretch of sun-tanned skin showing under Pavel's helmet and suddenly, with a strange upsurge of emotion, he felt how very fond he was of this youngster. Momentarily he recalled a childishly naïve question Pavel had asked him once: "Does the light of an extinct star go on reaching people on earth for years and years after its source has died?"

It does, Pavel, it does, my boy. That light travels for years, for thousands, millions of years. It passes through obstacles in its path, through meteor showers, cosmic nebulae, the darkest storm-clouds, the densest fogs. It is practically eternal, that light of a distant and perhaps extinct star. One shouldn't think of that star as extinct. No, one shouldn't. . . .

And yet he felt sad. He noticed that though the plane was still on the ground, the joy stick in front of him—coupled with the one in the front seat—shook slightly. That must be because Pavel was fingering it, going through the movements he'd been taught to perform when taking off.

Zavyalov, too, placed his hand on the thick, smoothly polished joy stick—simply in order to test his own feelings. The gesture somehow made him one with Pavel, with his heart and brain, with all his being, and this took the edge off his sorrow.

He looked down at the wings and at the two red stars on them. Stars like that had accompanied him during his years of fighting, now long past.

Then he raised his head and looked at the sky, clear and cloudless but already thinly veiled by a light autumn haze. He felt strangely happy.

Again he became conscious of Pavel's head and shoulders right in front of him. Let's go, Pavel, let's go! A new life is beginning!

But all he said aloud was the conventional regulation phrase addressed before taking off to the ground crew standing in front of the plane:

"Keep clear of the propeller."



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ALEXANDER CHAKOVSKY is a well-known Soviet author, critic and journalist, the chief editor of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. His novel about the Far East *With Us It's Morning*, his story about the Great Patriotic War *It Happened in Leningrad*, and his *A Year of Life* and *The Roads We Choose*, are among the best works of Soviet fiction.

*The Light of a Distant Star* was first published in the literary magazine *Oktyabr*, after which it was brought out in book form by Goslitizdat and Sovietsky Pisatel with editions of half a million copies each.

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